

Women, Cultural Duality and Space:
Themes in Twentieth-Century
Anglo-American Poetry

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Abstract

A longstanding critical map which has perpetuated the differences between British and American poetries is currently in the process of being redrawn. In recent years, there has been a marked interest in literary criticism which seeks to explore the rich and complex interplay between the two nations and their respective poetries. Despite this being a necessary dialogue, the contextualisation of women poets in this important field of enquiry has been largely unrecognised. This thesis responds to the problem of female negation by setting up a critical and cultural context which explores the poetic tendencies of nine Anglo-American women poets whose publishing histories span 1913-2006: British-born poets, Mina Loy (1882-1966) and Denise Levertov (1923-1997), and American-born poets, H.D. (1886-1961), Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991), Ruth Fainlight (1931-), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), Anne Stevenson (1933-), Anne Rouse (1954-) and Eva Salzman (1961-)

The intent of this study is to argue that the intersection of cultural duality and gender lends this poetry by Anglo-American women a particularly dynamic energy which generates a rich fretwork of spatial negotiations. This is primarily achieved through the poets' use of symbols which reflect their preoccupations with living as an outsider who oscillates in and between two places. Often, although not exclusively, metaphors of estrangement are explicitly gendered and signify the search for a female space. The theoretical work of French feminist and poststructuralist, Julia Kristeva and Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, proposes that the condition of the social outsider can be harmonised within the imaginative space of poetry, thus offering writers the potential to 'change and appropriate' the limitations of the social space in which they find themselves. Especially appealing for expatriate women poets then, the creative writing process precipitates their empowerment, liberation and the opportunity to re-imagine a parallel world to inhabit. The concept of space and how it is perceived imaginatively in this range of poetry determines the thematic structure of the thesis. Individual chapters focus upon locations, homes, journeys, bodies and landscapes, and myth. The formation reflects a progression from spaces that are grounded in material conditions, as with locations, the home, and journeys, towards spaces that are highly intimate and abstract, as with bodies and landscapes, and myth.

Responding to the limitations of binary discourses that uphold the divide between American and British poetries, as well as to the lack of feminist engagement with cultural discourses, this thesis offers a number of frameworks for reading Anglo-American poetry. While rejecting prescriptive definitions, it endeavours to set up a sufficiently open narrative that can encompass poets dating before the twentieth-century, contemporary poets in the current climate, as well as poets who will continue to complicate the American/British axis in the future.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis is to conceive a critical context which accommodates a cross-section of poetry by twentieth-century Anglo-American women poets. Although a range of material has contributed to the ongoing debates surrounding Anglo-American literary relations, the contextualisation of women in this field has been largely overlooked. This research considers the poetry of nine Anglo-American women writers – Mina Loy, H.D., Laura (Riding) Jackson, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Ruth Fainlight, Anne Stevenson, Anne Rouse and Eva Salzman – and investigates how they develop a unique and dynamic aesthetic which allows them to explore the convergence, divergence and merging of female and dual-national identities. Even though the poets are highly individual in terms of their poetic practices, common strategies emerge which illustrate how the poets are empowered by the creative writing process as they use it to explore the condition of the outsider which is precipitated by their expatriation and sense of femaleness.

Despite the shortcomings in terms of contextualising women poets, the critical map which charts Anglo-American poetic relations is currently in the process of being redrawn. Recent cross-Atlantic material has been instrumental in the positioning of this research for it not only legitimizes the need for a specifically female perspective, but also underlines its timeliness in relation to the growing interest in the field of cross-Atlantic relations. In 1998, American-scholar Keith Tuma published *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers*, examining the extent to which ‘British

poetry is dead' to American readers.¹ Tuma calls for us to abandon ideas of unity in the two poetries as well as oppositions, which he claims will enable us to see that poets sometimes go their separate ways and at other times find parallel practices 'via transatlantic communication.'² This research also argues for the same ambiguities which can be seen in a poet like Loy who was intent on distancing herself from England, whereas Fainlight and Salzman see it as their duty to bridge the gap between the two nations. Three years later, Tuma produced an *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (2001), in which he presented previously neglected British poets such as Mina Loy, Basil Bunting and John Rodker to a mainly American audience.³ Tuma's anthology was likened to 'a large rock thrown in a hitherto quiet pond.'⁴ The purpose of Paul Giles' *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (2002) is likewise to read British and American literatures in parallel.⁵ His text includes a superb essay on Thom Gunn and Plath which sees their excellence lying in the ability to evade national identifications. A year later, Romana Huk advocated a similar transnationalism by editing a collection of essays entitled *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (2003) examining avant-garde poetics on both sides of the Atlantic.⁶ Steve Clark and Mark Ford's edited collection, *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American*

¹ Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 1.

² Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles*, p. 41.

³ Keith Tuma (ed.), *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Tuma's anthology was reviewed by Tony Frazer, 'Defining the Century', *Chicago Review*, vol. 47: no. 3 (Fall 2001), p. 121.

⁵ Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁶ Romana Huk (ed.), *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

Poetic Relations Since 1925 (2004) has also been especially useful for an ethos which underpins the cooperation and influence between the poetries and poets of the two nations.⁷ The essays explore the poetic exchanges between the two nations and include analyses of poets including W. H. Auden, Thom Gunn, Susan Howe and W. B. Yeats. The same year, Sandra Gilbert produced an essay called 'New British Poetry' which points to the inadequacy of criticism that enforces the differences between the two poetries:

Ought poets to be categorized by geography, by language, or by some subtle, barely discernible affiliation with traditions that are themselves almost impossible to define? This question is made especially difficult not just because of the ambiguities of nationality that we can associate with major twentieth-century Anglophone poets from Eliot to Plath but also by the multiple and complex poetic practices ... described by critics ... who are convinced of the "differences" that separate contemporary British and American poetries.⁸

Gilbert makes some interesting points concerning the 'ambiguities of nationality' that characterise cross-cultural poetry and claims that perceiving the poetries as separate takes no account of the 'multiple and complex poetic practices' that are embedded within the poetry. In addition to this sustained body of critical work there is a range of journals examining Anglo-American or transatlantic literature and literary relations including, *Atlantic Studies*, *Comparative American Studies*, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* and most notably *Symbiosis* which has just hosted its sixth annual conference focusing on the theme of 'Anglo-American Aesthetics: Innovations and Economies of Influence' at Brunel University. Clearly, this sustained period of critical analysis indicates irreverence towards

⁷ Steve Clark and Mark Ford (eds.), *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

⁸ Gilbert, Sandra M., 'New British Poetry', *Poetry*, (New York; Chicago, 184:3, Jun/Jul 2004), p.227-234.

previous commentaries that largely perceive American and British poetries in terms of difference.

Broadly speaking, these differences have generally been defined around a rather crude binary based on form. Donald Davie has written extensively on the perceptions of difference between American and British poetries, even though he does not necessarily advocate them himself. He notes that: 'American poetry was allowed to be expansive and exciting; British poetry had to be unexciting and comfortable and "little"'.⁹ Davie implies that 'unexciting and comfortable' poetry is the kind that conforms to traditional metres and rhythms, the highly technical, if predictable, type of poetry which is associated with British verse forms; on the other hand, 'expansive and exciting' is considered to be writing that is delivered through free verse, ruptured syntax, distorted lines and line lengths, and the manipulation of typography and space. The problem with charting the differences between poetries is that labels become stereotypes which in turn become fixed opinions in critical narratives. Clark and Ford have addressed the problem of fixed opinion: 'Both British and American criticism seem more comfortable with narratives that define their respective poetries in isolation from each other, and this separation has come to be institutionalised in universities on both sides of the Atlantic'.¹⁰ The perpetuating stereotypes which distinguish British from American poetries makes this research, and earlier studies, all the more

⁹ Donald Davie's views are outlined by Andrew Duncan in 'The Invisible Museum' (a review of Keith Tuma's *20th Century British and Irish Poetry*), *Poetry Review*, 92:2 [Accessed online: <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr92-2/duncan.htm>]. In this article Duncan claims that the disgruntled reception Tuma's anthology has received in Britain is largely because reviewers 'still accept Davie's thesis – poetry which is expansive and exciting does not count as properly British.' Bearing this in mind then, some of Tuma's choices such as Mina Loy, John Rodker and Tom Raworth, tend to irk some critics who see this as an Americanised perspective of twentieth-century British poetry.

¹⁰ Steve Clark and Mark Ford (eds.) *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 8.

necessary, for it illustrates the increasing difficulties in reading Anglo-American poetry within a context based on difference.

Perhaps these limiting views on nationhood have contributed, in part, to the increasing ambiguity surrounding the term 'Anglo-American'. It is rarely used in cross Atlantic discussions on literature with poetry editors even favouring such simplistic descriptions as 'an American poet living in Britain'.¹¹ At other times, when the term is used there is often no critical definition to accompany it. Other scholars find the coinage 'transatlantic' more appropriate depending upon whether the connection between North and South America with Europe and Africa holds enough significance. Macpherson favours the transatlantic approach, yet interestingly she also notes the importance of finding a term that 'allows for localities to be simultaneously interconnected and separate'.¹² Although I have not used the term 'transatlantic' because of its implication of a scope far beyond America and Britain, Macpherson's call for co-operation between the two is refreshing in a climate founded on difference. Strangely, the term 'Anglo-American' – a coinage which is clearly provocative enough to extend and deepen the debate on cross-Atlantic relations – seems to have become increasingly redundant. Within a critical climate committed to the rigorous use of terminology – the term is too liberal, too loose, too disorderly perhaps. Yet, as this

¹¹ Bloodaxe Books uses this phrasing to describe the cultural orientation of both Anne Rouse and Eva Salzman on the jacket cover of the poets' collections. I see this term as being too simplified; it suggests nothing of the complex situation of the poet who lives in and between the two nations. It also raises unnecessary questions that enforce difference. Leaning towards this simple phrasing of Anne Rouse's Anglo-American identity, John O'Donoghue states that she 'is not quite a Cockney poet' ('All Genned Up', *PN Review*, Manchester, September-October 2001). As the rest of the argument will show this type of commentary is not unusual. Some reviewers seem to expect American-born poets to be conspicuously English in their style (and vice versa) and are surprised when they do not 'perform'. Insensitive remarks like O'Donoghue's enforce the divide between the poetries and make no allowances for the cultural variability in the poets' work.

¹² Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, 'Views from the Other Side: Transatlantic Literature and Cultural Exchange', *Literature Compass*, 4:2 (2007), p. 356.

argument will illustrate, because of the knotty nature of the cross Atlantic literary atmosphere, the term finally demands attention. An ambiguous climate calls for an equally ambiguous synonym.

One major reason why the term needs to regain its literary currency, and also why I am reclaiming it here, is because it reflects a poet's cultural identity accurately in terms of geographical origins. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as 'an American of British origin' or, more liberally, 'of belonging to both England and America'.¹³ The first part of the definition elevates American identity over British identity, something I am reluctant to enforce. Yet the second part of the definition, 'of belonging to both England and America', is a more embracing reflection of the poets' cultural standing as it pertains to the physical journey from America to England and vice versa. The hyphen itself also becomes a symbol which defines the juncture at which the two nations and their poetic tendencies either converge, diverge or merge. Tuma is closest to articulating the evasive understanding of the term. Fully aware of the problems of cross-cultural poetic integration his intentions are primarily to 'paint some detail into the larger picture of the blind struggles across the hyphen in "Anglo-American" in order to complicate it, without necessarily blotting the picture out.'¹⁴ Like Tuma, this argument is driven by the need to rejuvenate the term 'Anglo-American' for without doing so the misrepresentation and neglect of poetry that straddles the Atlantic will continue.

¹³ The Oxford English Dictionary

¹⁴ Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 11.

The eight Anglo-American writers whose poetry forms the basis of this thesis have been selected for their rich interplay of female and national preoccupations, but also for their rather patchy appearances in anthologies and literary criticism which mostly misrepresents their dual national identity. Invariably, this patchiness is due to the limitations imposed by national stereotypes. However, with the rising critical awareness of an American/British interface and the emergence of new positions for reading Anglo-American literature, it is hoped that the situation for these poets, and others like them, will improve. Loy, a British-born poet, is boldly proclaimed by Virginia Kouidis as *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (1980) in the title of her book – crucially the first full-length re-evaluative analysis of Loy's poetry. Kouidis asserts her belief that Loy's poetry warrants a national label 'because of its contributions to feminist thought and art and to an understanding of the origins, practice, and aims of American poetic modernism.'¹⁵ One of the risks of presenting Loy as an American poet can result in her obscurity in British histories where she equally belongs. It took until 1997 for her poetry to be edited and championed by Roger Conover for a British audience in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* – although he too conceived that 'Loy never belonged to England.'¹⁶ In 2001, she featured in Tuma's *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* but his collection as a whole received a hostile critical reception and was condemned by Sean O'Brien as being 'post-imaginative'.¹⁷ Jane Dowson is the first scholar to position her within the context of British modernism in *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity* (2002). However, Loy is rejected,

¹⁵ Virginia Kouidis, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 1-2.

¹⁶ Roger Conover in the introduction to Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. xvii.

¹⁷ Sean O'Brien, 'Bizarro's Bounty', *Poetry Review*, 91:2 Summer 2001, [<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr91-2/tuma.htm>]

most bizarrely of all, for *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* by Fleur Adcock, who reasons that 'her most recent advocates have failed to persuade me that her "poetry of ideas and wordplay" retains much more than curiosity value; her impulse to experiment was admirable in itself, but the results now look ... quaint and over written.'¹⁸

This bias does not seem to work in Britain's favour if we consider Janice Robinson's critical analysis of H.D. who expatriated from America to London. Robinson labels her as *H.D., The Life and Work of an American Poet* (1982). Despite H.D.'s influential role in the Anglo-American movement Imagism, her lengthy residence in England rarely warrants her a position in British poetic canons. H.D. is always more likely to be found in American anthologies and she features in some of the most influential ones such as Donald Hall's *American Poetry: An Introductory Anthology* (1969), Richard Ellman's *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (1976) and Geoffrey Moore's *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (1977). Denise Levertov has suffered a similar fate to H.D. in that her poetic oeuvre has largely been Americanised, despite her expatriation from Britain. Yet, she does not quite have the steadfast reputation of H.D. – she features in Ellman's American anthology but not Hall's and Moore's. Despite this, Levertov's successful alliance with members of the Black Mountain Group in the 1950s has often eliminated her British background entirely. In a biographical sketch of Levertov in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1996), she is defined as a poet who 'remade herself into a quintessentially American poet.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Fleur Adcock ed., *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Fourth Edition* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), p.

Furthermore, the measures in her poetry are considered to be 'all American' according to Gilbert Sorrentino who perceives the influence of William Carlos Williams in her work.²⁰ More ambiguously, in a review of her sixth volume of poetry, *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961), James Wright describes the character of her poetry as 'remarkably American precisely *because* it is genuinely international.'²¹

From another perspective, a British bias can be detected in the placing of poets, Anne Stevenson and Ruth Fainlight, who both spent their formative years growing up in America before moving to Britain. They are widely recognised in British anthologies yet their poetry seems to have been eclipsed when it comes to an American canon. Neither of them features in any of the American anthologies already mentioned, nor do they feature in Louise Bernikow's *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950* (1979), and Cora Kaplan's *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets* (1975), possibly because they were only just establishing their poetic careers. Fainlight claims this is due to the fact that she has not visited America for years and has lost touch with many of her contacts, and also that she has chosen to make Britain her permanent home.²² Dana Gioia understands the problems of trying to reclaim a poet who has made another country her home: 'It is a pleasure to share [Anne Stevenson] with England but not at the expense of excluding her from the American

²⁰ Gilbert Sorrentino, 'Measure of Maturity', in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 20.

²¹ James Wright, 'From "Gravity and Incantation"', reprinted in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 17.

²² Interview with Ruth Fainlight conducted by Melanie Petch in April 2004. Please refer to appendix.

canon where she also belongs ...'²³ Even 'sharing' seems to be problematic in a climate that prefers to define poets as either American or British. Sylvia Plath is perhaps the only poet who is 'shared', although Tracy Brain demonstrates how this can also develop into rivalry:

In spite of her association with two countries, Plath's midatlanticism is largely ignored by critics, who contest ownership of Plath and the 'facts' about her life and work by fighting over her nationality, making her one thing or the other, or disregarding the issue of nationality altogether.²⁴

The contestation of ownership could also be said to be fuelled by the mythologised events in her tragic personal life. Commercially, Plath is still a sure-fire way of selling books and this lends her a rather unique position in the Anglo-American debate.

Echoing the experience of Fainlight and Stevenson, contemporary poets, Anne Rouse and Eva Salzman have established their literary reputations in Britain. Eva Salzman was included in the New Generation crop of young poets whilst Rouse was omitted. However, they both feature in *Making for Planet Alice: New Women Poets* (1997), a collection of poetry by writers from Britain and Ireland, and Linda France's *Sixty Women Poets* (1993).²⁵ At the present time neither of the poets has publishers in America. Despite the recognition in England, Salzman still identifies American prejudice in certain literary circles:

English poetry is "a place I like" ... but I'm not sure it always likes me! Americans are recognized and even feted here, but usually after they're dead. During an Oxford event commemorating the Oxford Poets list, the

²³ Dana Gioia, 'Anne Stevenson Poet-Critic' in *The Way You Say The World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson*, compiled by John Lucas and Matt Simpson (Beeston: Shoestring Press, 2003), p. 33.

²⁴ Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), p. 46.

²⁵ Incidentally, Anne Stevenson also appears in France's anthology, yet Fainlight does not. Again, this suggests the intermittent and patchy appearance of Anglo-American women poets in really influential anthologies.

Bronx poet, Michael Donaghy and I, both Oxford poets at that time, sat in the audience listening to English voices reading out absent or dead American writers. We weren't asked to read at all – were, in fact, the only current poets on the list who didn't read that night! That sort of thing makes you wonder.²⁶

Looking at the conflicted picture that emerges, it could also be said that as well as the suggestion of British prejudice against some American writers, there is some indication that once poets leave their homeland they are more likely to find a sympathetic audience in their adopted environment. In fact, with the exception of H.D. and Plath (who is a different case entirely), the poets presented in this research have all had more publishing success in their adopted homes than their place of birth. This might be comparable to Auden's departure from England to America in 1939 which caused 'such outrage and dismay in his own country the matter was raised ... in the House of Commons, and some kind of official action mooted.'²⁷ Evidently, loyalty to one's nation raises implicit socio-political questions about how and where a poet is finally placed or, indeed, rejected in literary formations. The editor of *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (1993) Joanne Shattock, also acknowledges the complicated decisions an editor must make in terms of the national and cultural identity of a poet.

The field of coverage is British women writers, but in some instances national boundaries have been deliberately blurred. The term 'British' indicates birth within the United Kingdom and a writing life conducted mainly in Britain, although literary lives tend to resist such strict demarcation.²⁸

²⁶ Interview with Eva Salzman conducted by Lidia Vianu, January 2003.

http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/eva_salzman.htm [Accessed January 2005].

²⁷ Steve Clark and Mark Ford (eds.), *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2004), p. 4.

²⁸ Joanne Shattock ed., *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Oxford: 1993), p. vii.

In her collection she includes biographical entries for Plath and Loy, yet chooses to omit Levertov. She accepts the problems surrounding poets that move between nations and her selection also reflects a degree of inconsistency. What is absolute amidst all this inconsistency is that these poets are placed according to multiple factors. Sometimes these are driven by where they live, at others by where they were born and also by where their writing identity is most established.

The historical scope of this thesis covers most of the twentieth century and the cusp of the twenty-first, starting with the publication of Loy's poem 'Parturition' in *The Trend* in October 1914, and finishing with poems taken from Ruth Fainlight's *Burning Wire* collection in 2002. The beginning of the twentieth century seems to be particularly contingent upon an Anglo-American interface, primarily due to the international spirit of modernism which can be characterised, very broadly, as the deployment of various avant-garde techniques across the full range of arts. In terms of literature, the first Anglo-American movement, Imagism, which was formally initiated by Ezra Pound in 1912, compounded the poetic relationship between America and Britain and staged the opening for a period of significant literary exchanges. The nature of these exchanges is outlined further by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik:

The transatlantic nature of Modernism itself, exemplified by the lives and works of Eliot, H.D., Pound, Stein and Barnes, was part of a newly dynamised interchange between America and Europe that was to influence the course of culture and politics for the rest of the twentieth century.²⁹

²⁹ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'Unreal cities and undead legacies: T.S.Eliot and Gothic hauntings in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Barnes's *Nightwood*' in Janet Beer and Bridget Bennett (eds.), *Special*

The 'dynamised interchange' to which Horner and Zlosnik refer to is the focal point of this study especially when considered in the light of the women poets writing in this period. The scope of this thesis, although it is limited to poetry produced between the years 1914 and 2002, by the very nature of its variability, allows for inclusions both pre- and post-twentieth century as well as further additions inbetween. It is also interesting to note the longevity of some of the poets and the persuasive poetic contributions they make within a broader view of twentieth-century poetics. H.D. and Loy continued writing up until the 1960s, and Fainlight and Stevenson, who began writing in the 1950s, are still publishing today. There was almost certainly a crossover point in the early 1960s when Loy, H.D., Levertov, Fainlight, Plath and Stevenson were all writing at the same time.

Typically, however, this study is concerned with setting up a reading position motivated by both aesthetic and cultural concerns from which to critically evaluate the valuable contributions by the poets outlined above. Chapter Two is mostly concerned with outlining the emergence of a women's Anglo-American aesthetic characterised mainly by the convergence, divergence and merging of female and national consciousnesses. I have drawn here upon critical works that are concerned with theorising the combination of gender and cultural duality. Primarily, these are Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's edited collection, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994), and Inderpal Grewal's, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas,*

Relationships: Anglo-American Affinities and Antagonisms, 1854-1936 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 224.

Neoliberalisms (2005).³⁰ Both texts aim to locate feminist practices within the framework of transnational exchanges and cultural asymmetries. Without such a framework, they fear that 'feminist movements will fail to understand the maternal conditions that structure women's lives in diverse conditions.'³¹ At times, this selection of poetry indicates how nation and gender are particularly connected or converging, especially (although not exclusively) in the work of Fainlight and Salzman. At other times the relationship between gender and nation becomes less obvious, as is often evident in the poetry of Levertov, for example. For Loy, the inextricable bond between her radical poetics and her female voice merge to such an extent that her poetry is visibly enlivened as a result. Either way, it is clear that a positive creative dynamic emerges in their writing, despite the poets experiencing what can be seen as a doubly displaced identity making this an exclusively female experience. The emergence of this double displacement is charted in Chapter Two which seeks to contextualise and feminise the debate surrounding Anglo-American poetics and discusses the ways each poet expatriated and the effect, if any, this had upon their work. Outlining these variables illustrates how criticism up until now has either straight-jacketed these women into frameworks built around nationhood or chosen to ignore the experience of womanhood entirely by assuming that male and female experiences of dual-nationality must be the same. Fundamentally, the rationale for the exclusive discussion of women writers in this thesis is that the experience of expatriation cannot be the same for men as it is for women. Profoundly aware of the subliminal sensations of 'outsiderdom'

³⁰ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds.), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

³¹ *ibid*, p. 17.

that women naturally experience as part of the socially constructed role of femaleness, the nine women poets discussed here connect with cultural duality from a different vantage point entirely. Although it should no longer be necessary to justify the exclusive discussion of women writers, it is important to highlight the dynamic intensity that gender brings to the discussion of this thesis. Chapter Two elaborates further on the interplay between gender and cultural duality and to argue for the rejuvenating energy it injects into women's writing.

Due to the variability and multiple poetic practices of these poets, it became clear very early in this research process that there were hardly any recognizable historical or stylistic developments in their writing only that they seemed to resist easy categorisation in these terms. Historically, for example, the poets' discussions of issues such as feminism have neither intensified nor declined over the century; almost all the nine poets from Loy to Rouse admit to a feminist impetus driving – although not dictating – their work. Likewise, there are few stylistic developments in the spectrum of poetry discussed here; Loy's poetics were overly radical in the early-twentieth century, yet Plath and Salzman can also be noted for their equally playful linguistic experiments. The most obvious connection between the poets needed charting in a more conceptual fashion. It became necessary to adopt a thematic structure for the thesis, therefore, due to the reoccurring clusters of spatial themes such as locations, homes, journeys, landscapes of the body, and mythological narratives. As Kaplan states, the insistence on situating oneself spatially in the environment is an especially important issue for women: 'Such a concern with location and space, with rooms of one's own, with expanding "home" from the domestic to the public sphere, has been one

of the hallmarks of western feminist practice.’³² Kaplan makes an interesting observation on the way social spaces are appropriated by women in order to feminize and/or personalize them. In fact, as we make our mark on the twenty-first century the desire to personalize space is stronger than ever before with virtual space being devoured as a means of affirming our identity and, indeed, our existence. Aforementioned, the compelling spatial material found in this poetry has entirely dictated the structure of the thesis and, as such, the thematic areas anticipate the focus for each of the subsequent chapters. Taking a broad view, it is possible to see how these spatial preoccupations become akin to a journey, of sorts; there is a discernible progression from an entirely grounded sense of spatial locations and places proceeding to an interiorized, thus more imaginative, view of the body and the female imagination. It is also important to mention that not all the chapters feature all the poets. Rather, each chapter includes the most pertinent examples selected from the body of their writing. It would be impossible to consider myth without drawing upon H.D., for example. However, she also makes some interesting observations on place that are not included in Chapter Three; this is due to the limited amount of space assigned for each chapter. So, often, poets who are insistent and overtly provocative in their connections with each of the chapter themes feature more prominently whilst other significant yet more oblique poems are discarded.

Chapter Three initiates the discussion of space by considering the significance of location to Anglo-American women poets. Location, place and geography are especially poignant to the expatriate for it is expected that the desire to ‘belong’ is overwhelming amidst the shift

³² Caren Kaplan, ‘The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice’ in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, p. 137.

between two nations. One might expect, in this case, to see narratives of displacement permeating this selection of poetry. Yet, interestingly, the literary representations of specific Anglo-American locations suggest how the wrench between the two can often be harmonized within the poem itself. A physical Anglo-American location or locations are visibly re-imagined in order to create new feminized locations. Often the poems are concerned with implanting a family history within a location as if in doing so the poets affirm their sense of identity within a world from which they see themselves disengaged. Other poems make use of maternal symbols and metaphor to illustrate an intricate bond between actual mothers or motherlands and the poet. In doing so, they strengthen their presence within an imaginary realm that is conceived out of their desire to show that belonging is not so much an entitlement as something that can be worked towards creatively.

Chapter Four centres upon the concept of home, another theme that one might expect to be particularly consuming for a writer who moves between two cultures. Does home bear any more symbolic relevance to a poet distanced from their native land? Andrew Gurr certainly believes this is so: 'The need for a sense of home as a base, a source of identity even more than a refuge, has grown powerfully in the last century or so. This sense of home is the goal of all voyages of self-discovery which have become the characteristic shape of modern literature.'³³ And yet, home considered as a domestic space, as a space of containment, takes on different values for women poets. Although there is a palpable longing to belong, this can so often be better achieved imaginatively rather than in material conditions, a

³³ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (The Harvester Press: Brighton, 1981), p. 12.

theme that is developed in all the chapters. The material conditions of the home for women, when considered in the light of the socially constructed role that has been carved for them, is still a source of great conflict in their poetry. It is clear that these poems often show men and women occupying the same domestic sphere which exacerbates conflict. However, this conflict can be 'written out' in powerful and often strident poems that attempt to subvert the ideological roles that have been implanted upon women. One way of resolving the problems is through the use of certain techniques such as satire, dreams and fairytales which all seek to subvert patriarchal laws and thus empower the poets. Moreover, when women explore the home space more obliquely it also offers a highly-charged creative dynamic. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphor in Modern Women's Fiction* (1990) offers an interesting insight into the literary devices used by women writers to express a feminized landscape. They argue that one of the most common devices used by the women writers in their study is their metaphoric use of space that denotes both containment and freedom. They note the paradox between the ways in which the room is 'still often used to suggest negative feelings of constraint' and the 'sense of space, envisaged in wide open land and unchartered tracts of sea.'³⁴ These tendencies are also evident in this chapter, such as with Rouse, for example, who uses the passage between two houses to convey the potential for freedom outside domestic boundaries. Levertov, on the other hand, uses memories and ekphrasis (a photographic narrative) to elevate the positive attributes of the home – where the imagination can play more freely without the obvious burdens of sexual discord.

³⁴ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphor in Modern Women's Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 7.

Chapter Five illustrates how the journey space and the physical act of travelling is another preoccupying theme for these poets and, in fact, this chapter marks the juncture between conveying spatial themes located very much within a concrete reality (as with places and homes) and themes which offer an interiorized perspective on space as with the following chapters on bodily landscapes and fictions. The journey, however, is an interesting area for discussion in that it is both somewhere and nowhere simultaneously – a space of inbetween. Above all, it becomes a powerfully charged vehicle which produces highly imaginative poetry often with a self-reflective edge. Caren Kaplan argues that: 'Travel is very much a modern concept, signifying both commercial and leisure movement in an era of expanding Western capitalism.'³⁵ This modern concept saw the speed in which the average person travelled from one place to another increase and the pace of life itself intensify. The journey space, therefore, is nearly always connected to the concept of time and, rather joyously, poems often open up an area where it is possible to either temporarily suspend or accelerate it. A modernist writer, like Loy, for example, is enthralled by the physical sensation of *feeling* speed whilst a later generation of poets use the journey as a means of inhabiting a quiet place of stasis – to imaginatively remove themselves from real time. Obvious travel metaphors such as mirrors, windows and glass are also significant reference points in this selection of poetry and relate both implicitly and explicitly to women. The journey, although not always obviously so, becomes a site of intense self-reflection and, indeed, a space in which female identity can be either affirmed or negated.

³⁵ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 3.

Chapter Six is particularly concerned with the theorisation of bodies as maps, borders and landscapes. The twentieth century has largely retold a narrative that sees women exploring and articulating their own bodily landscapes, creating their own feminised narratives, which is in direct response to the imperial and colonial age which largely saw an abundance of male travellers likening previously undiscovered worlds to the female form.³⁶ Often the poetry is highly lyrical in its desire to achieve the effect of intimacy and an obvious female subjectivity. Some of the poems convey the experience of childbirth or motherhood and are generally concerned with affirming female identity. Levertov's poems do not necessarily represent the female form but she is aptly able to convey the deepest of human emotions by treating the body as a map to be explored with compassion and sensitivity.

Chapter Seven argues that fictional narratives drawn from myths are often adapted in order to superimpose upon them a feminised perspective that reworks the exclusion or demonisation of women. What emerges is the move towards achieving a collective female consciousness with the aim of subverting laws that govern them in material conditions. Mostly, the stories these women appropriate are centred upon a female protagonist or else adopt a female point of view where none existed before. At other times, poets offer a critique on the current state of patriarchal myth-telling and reveal scepticism towards such narratives. Ultimately, this chapter argues that mytho-narratives are appropriated in an attempt to either negate patriarchal authority or affirm female identity by re-positioning women as powerful figures that will find a place in future generations of storytelling.

³⁶ See Anne McClintock's, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) for a superb consideration of the intersection of race and gender.

As I have conveyed, it is almost impossible to speak of a definitive aesthetic in terms of Anglo-American women's poetry, particularly when considering the variability in the poets' stylistic tendencies, their individual voices and their historical dimensions. However, one way of framing the thematic concerns articulated above and pulling together what is, undoubtedly, a rather ungovernable range of poetry, is to draw upon modern theoretical discourses which complement the significance of spatial negotiations. Nowadays, spatial theories seem to dominate almost every field of research so the range of critical dialogue is extensive. This study makes use of the influential work produced by Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, entitled *The Production of Space* (1974),³⁷ and French feminist and poststructuralist critic, Julia Kristeva, particularly her essay, 'Women's Time' (1979)³⁸ The work of these theorists was chosen because it harmonises well with some of the principal concerns of this thesis: with the creative potential of the imagination, with the differences between physical and mental space, and with the feminization of space. Furthermore, the transatlantic focus of this research is ultimately concerned with the spatial practice of moving between one country or place to another and the impact this journeying has upon poets' creativity as well as their sense of female self. The transplantation from one place to another is often thought of negatively in terms of displacement and does not account for the positive dynamic at work as mental and physical spaces collide and overlap. As such, the theories of Lefebvre and Kristeva explore the desiring imaginative space of the text as a vehicle through which discord and displacement can be soothed and appropriated.

³⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1991 (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1974).

³⁸ First published as 'Le temps des femmes' in 33/44: *Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents* (Winter 1979), pp. 5-19. This was translated in *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 13-35. I refer to the version reprinted in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 187-213.

Lefebvre's proposition is sophisticated to the point of impenetrability at times: however, chiefly he is concerned with bridging the gap between the 'mental' space of philosophy and the 'real' space in which we physically live. He outlines the potentialities of space by outlining a three-part process which he defines as: 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational spaces'. Andrew Thacker's *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (2003) has been a vital accompaniment to reading and understanding Lefebvre, especially in his clarification of the three spatial components which he translates effectively as the 'experienced – perceived – imagined triad'.³⁹ 'Spatial practice' in Lefebvrian terms refers to the way space is experienced by individuals within a given society, the way individuals are manipulated in certain spaces. Transatlantic journeys, therefore, are spatial practices in that they involve individuals moving from one space to another. 'Representations of space' refer to the way the spatial practices of a given society can be monitored, charted or documented. Thacker uses examples of 'plans, maps and diagrams' to illustrate Lefebvre's theory. However, taking a specifically transatlantic approach, we might also refer to the documentation of flight paths and shipping routes between America and England as representations of space, founded out of the desire of individuals to move across the Atlantic. Both spatial practices and representations of space seem to be instrumental in establishing an ideology that determines how social space is valued and seen to be valued. 'Representational spaces', however, are imaginative areas, such as poems, which seek to overlay the other two spatial areas with ideas and 'non-verbal

³⁹ Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University, 2003), p. 20. Lefebvre refers to these spatial principles in a different triadic sequence: which he sees as a 'perceived-conceived-lived' triad (*The Production of Space*, p. 40). However, Thacker's definition seems to offer a more feasible definition of Lefebvre's premise and elevates the imaginative aspects of representational spaces.

symbols and signs.’⁴⁰ In other words, within the space of poems, existing social orders might be re-imagined and appropriated. Transatlantic journeys, therefore, are often seen to promote negative feelings of displacement which has become the dominant way of understanding both spatial practice and representations of space. This thesis, however, is interested in exploring the richness of representational spaces which go far beyond expressions of displacement. At first glance, it also seems that representational spaces, as defined by Lefebvre, have the potential to be the perfect vehicle for women to negotiate. However, Lefebvre does not speak about women very much. In fact his first mention of women occurs some two hundred pages into his text when referring to the ways in which the ancient Romans perceived space as being segregated. He writes that representational spaces were: ‘dual in character: the masculine principle, military, authoritarian, juridical – and dominant; and the feminine, which, though not denied, is integrated, thrust down into the “abyss” of the earth ...’⁴¹ A handful of further references to women and space reiterates the idea that from ancient times space has been governed by man and even though women are privileged enough to share it they are not permitted to give it shape, or to define it. Even Lefebvre is aware of the limitations of his own argument as he concedes that ‘...it is hard to resist the conclusion that it is time for the sterile space of men, founded on violence and misery, to give way to a women’s space.’⁴² Lefebvre’s thesis is suggestive for he offers a useful vocabulary with which to articulate the spatial preoccupations so evident in this range of women’s poetry. However, the limitations of his research, as we have witnessed, can be seen in his inability to see how men and women co-exist within social space and the

⁴⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 39.

⁴¹ *The Production of Space*, p. 245.

⁴² *The Production of Space*, p. 380.

impact this discord has upon representational spaces which are re-imagined solely by women.

Kristeva, however, who is always driven by a female impetus, continues where Lefebvre begins to falter. In her influential essay 'Women's Time', Kristeva speaks of the necessity of finding refuge in literature as she claims 'it is in the aspiration towards artistic and, in particular, literary creation that women's desire for affirmation now manifests itself.'⁴³ The creative space, or, as Lefebvre describes it, the representational space, is a viable avenue for exploration by the woman poet as 'literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe.'⁴⁴ Kristeva's emphasis is on the potentiality for women writers of imagining a new world and putting it into words. Echoing Lefebvre's concept of representational spaces, she further indicates that the creative arena 'makes a game, a space of fantasy and pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of social signs, the words of everyday communication.'⁴⁵ Lefebvre and Kristeva have a similar mantra in that they both outline a creative area that challenges dominant ideologies. Similarly, they both explore artistic subjectivity as a positive and creative element as opposed to socialised subjectivity that seeks to restrict and limit the self. Kristeva, however, offers a feminised vocabulary where she perceives the space within the imagination and hence the text as an 'a-topia, a place outside the law'⁴⁶ which offers an alternative lens on the world – a lens that captures 'the enigmas of the

⁴³ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *The Kristeva Reader*, (ed.) Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 206-7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 202.

body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.’⁴⁷ Lefebvre and Kristeva’s influential research on space has helped me to locate Anglo-American women’s poetry collectively as a largely positive event. This is especially significant when reading women’s poetry for it suggests a writer who creates and shapes the world they inhabit rather than simply accepting it as if a passive victim.

Concerned as it is with the interrelationship between gender, dual-nationality and space this thesis does not, and cannot, offer a streamlined genealogy of poetic development with clearly demarcated starting and finishing points. Neither does it provide comfortable interpretations of a definitive Anglo-American aesthetic. It also does not rule that cultural duality and gender are imperatives that should always be positioned together, nor, at the same time, does it suggest that they should always be read in isolation. Rather, this work is an engagement with some of the symbolic strategies that these particular women poets were, and still are, deploying in their poetry in order to re-imagine a textual world for themselves within distinctly spatial realms. This textual world affords them a contemplative space to self-reflect upon their frustrations, as well as enchantments, with the status quo. Ultimately, however, the creative output examined in the following chapters is seen as empowering their position as women poets and as expatriates, both collectively and individually.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 207.

Chapter Two

Anglo-American Poetics and Female Preoccupations

According to Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 'If the world is currently structured by transnational economic links and cultural asymmetries, locating feminist practices within these structures becomes imperative.'⁴⁸ Grewal and Kaplan make it clear that the growing interest in transatlantic exchanges requires a feminist dialogue if it is to reflect the extent of women's participation in the important interplay between America and Europe. Furthermore, these scholars see the potentiality of this interplay as being a vital area for 'creating alternative histories, identities and possibilities for alliances.'⁴⁹ Grewal and Kaplan do not apply their theories specifically to literature but do pave the way for feminist criticism in various fields to bring to the fore female experiences of transatlantic exchange. This chapter argues that it is impossible to define a straightforward template from which to read Anglo-American women's poetry primarily because the female preoccupations that intertwine with poetic ideals of nationhood are so variable in their scope. Mindful of the limitations of the dominant narratives that have defined the current Anglo-American critical climate, the purpose of this chapter is also to examine how these poets were and are claiming an alternative poetic space that resists the prescriptions of dominant narratives. This chapter is concerned with the technical aspects of poetry, such as form and poetic

⁴⁸ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds.), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁴⁹ Caren Kaplan, 'The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice', in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, p. 139.

voice, and contests the idea that Anglo-American poets must subscribe to one or other perceived literary nationalism. This chapter argues that these poems often display a multitude of variables that cannot be categorised so simply. Additionally, the poets' gender often complicates any seemingly simple definition. As previously outlined, the nature of Anglo-American poetics in twentieth-century criticism has largely been mapped in terms of crude binaries based around poetic form and voice, thus reflecting separate ideas of nationhood (also mirroring the cultural asymmetries that Grewal and Caplan acknowledge). Consequently, scholars are faced with the problem of not knowing how to homogenise men *and* women poets who expatriate across the Atlantic. In the previous chapter I referred to Sandra Gilbert's call for a 'barely discernible tradition' which would embrace the 'ambiguities of nationality' that Anglo-American poets display in their writing.⁵⁰

However, if these 'ambiguities

of nationality' are difficult to articulate in terms of men poets then it is doubly difficult for women poets given that they are either lumped together with male experience or located in terms of their occupation of the margins. Yet, Anglo-American women poets are self-consciously claiming an imaginative space by demonstrating, individually and as a group, a range of unique poetic practices that challenge models of nationhood. Above all, however, they are more inclined to resist national typecasts in their yearning for artistic and individual female autonomy. Rather than seeing narratives of displacement as one would expect with the cultural outsider, in this body of women's writing we see a creative dynamic at work which largely presents their experiences as women and as expatriates as a positive event.

⁵⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'New British Poetry', *Poetry* (New York; Chicago) (184:3) [Jun/Jul 2004], pp. 227-234.

In many ways, the concept of nation has always seemed to sit uneasily with women writers. Certainly, in the twentieth century, the early modernists were very much preoccupied with finding alternative imaginary realms to occupy. Virginia Woolf, for example, offers a female perspective on the patriotic Second World War hysteria that enveloped Britain in the late thirties and early forties in *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf maintains that it is impossible for women to remain patriotic to their country when they are so often rendered outsiders by patriarchal values.⁵¹ As part of her argument that implores women to reject the values of their own country in order to reclaim their own sense of identity, Woolf deploys the following mantra: 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'⁵² Woolf characteristically chooses the loftier space of the 'whole world' to occupy rather than share national boundaries with men. Woolf's statement still has currency sixty years later – women *do* approach national identity and, indeed, dual national identity differently to men. This view is consolidated in David Gervais' *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (1993) when he justifies his reasons for not including women writers in his analysis: '... I began to wonder if their concern with 'Englishness' were not of a different order, perhaps less public and geared to nationalistic attitudes. The subject remains to be attempted.'⁵³ Although specifically referring to Englishness, Gervais' statement, alongside Woolf's, implies that perceptions of national and cultural identity hold intrinsically different values for women –

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, an extract from *Three Guineas* reprinted as 'Woman and Nationalism' in Dennis Walder (ed.), *Literature in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.198-199.

⁵² Virginia Woolf, 'Woman and Nationalism' in Dennis Walder (ed.), *Literature in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 199.

⁵³ David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. xiii-xiv.

women experience national identity differently. The viability of this perspective is increased in the light of the poets' cultural duality as they often see themselves displaced in the nation they expatriated to as well as feeling denaturalized on returning to their place of birth. With the rising popularity of Anglo-American discussions, it seems more vital than ever to attempt the subject of presenting women's experiences of nationhood; without doubt, the critical map needs expanding to accommodate the variable experiences of this group of women writers.

The Poets: Their Anglo-American Poetics and their Female Preoccupations

This chapter is fundamentally about the poets themselves, their ways of expatriating, their individual approaches to Anglo-American poetics and their female, and at times, feminist, preoccupations. However, in terms of the structuring of this particular chapter, it has been difficult to find a suitable arrangement for these poets and their poetic practices. As mentioned in Chapter One the variability in their writing does not permit a stylistic, cultural, national or historical pattern or progression to emerge. However, the American/British interface is paramount, if only to dismantle its perceived differences, so I have chosen to divide the poets by their cultural denomination – British-Americans and American-Britons. This is not to straightjacket these writers into certain literary nationalisms but to show a clear argument against the poets 'fitting' neatly into certain reductive frameworks. Moreover, the connections between poets who expatriated opposite ways are especially evident at times. Indeed, this small body of women writers, whose poetry spans nearly ninety years, can be seen to be mutually supportive of, and often

influenced by, each others' works, thus echoing Grewal and Kaplan's call for possible alliances. These poets have never been read collectively within an Anglo-American context, even though there are obvious artistic connections between Loy, H.D. and Levertov, as well as Plath being an influential presence to Fainlight, Stevenson and Rouse. Above all, their inconstant poetic practices make for a curiously untidy critical landscape – one that is impossible to homogenize. As we shall also see, the unfolding terrain has no fixed starting or finishing points and can easily accommodate new additions from both pre and post twentieth-century generations. It is from this unruly position that we can begin to contextualize Anglo-American poets but to do so with an awareness of a resolutely female energy.

The British-Americans: Mina Loy (1882-1966) and Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

Out of the nine poets in this research, only Mina Loy and Denise Levertov crossed the Atlantic from Britain to America. It is also the case that these two poets are the most stylistically innovative in terms of poetic form. I rather think that Loy's radical Anglo-American poetics were as much tied to her stifling Victorian upbringing in England as they were to her expatriation to Europe and then eventually America. In fact her auto-mythological poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (1923-25) shows how Loy's impressions of England are often intrinsically tied to her mother; she perceives her mother in the poem as 'Albion/ in female form'.⁵⁴ Roger Conover, editor of her poetry posthumous collections *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (1982) and *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (1996), makes clear just

⁵⁴ Mina Loy, *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose, The Last Lunar Baedeker* (Highlands: Jargon Society, 1982), p. 123.

how dominating her mother's presence was upon Loy during her adolescent years by suggesting that her aptitude for art and poetry, although encouraged by her father, was strictly censured and stifled by her mother.⁵⁵ In an autobiographical extract, 'Notes on Childhood', Loy writes: 'drawings and poems were the prey of her [mother's] attacks.'⁵⁶ Further, in a letter to one of her contemporaries, American novelist, Carl Van Vechten, she confides: 'when I have written anything I mean I feel my family on top of me.'⁵⁷ There is a clear sense with Loy that escaping from England was as much about releasing herself from her mother's grasp; her time spent in Europe and America enabled her to reinvent herself in a manner which would have been outrageously unacceptable back home.

Reinvention is seen most profoundly in her poetic expression. Once in Europe, and influenced by other radical thinkers and artists such as Mabel Dodge, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Gertrude Stein, Loy seems to manipulate her play with verbal expression. Her early poems 'Parturition', 'Italian Pictures' and 'Three Moments in Paris' (all published in 1914) reveal her tendency to break with conventional modes of expression. Even though these early poems were written while Loy was in staying in Florence, it is in America where her poetic reputation was first established. Magazines such as *Camera Work* and *Trend* under the editorship of Alfred Stieglitz and Carl Van Vechten respectively were Loy's first receptors across the Atlantic and published Loy's early pieces. *Camera Work* in particular sought to give 'the younger men free rein to experiment with new

⁵⁵ The general contours of Mina's life are outlined by Roger Conover in 'Time-Table,' *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (Highlands, 1982), p.lxiii.

⁵⁶ Mina Loy, 'Notes on Childhood,' *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, p. 314

⁵⁷ A quotation used in Elizabeth Arnold's article, 'Mina Loy and the Futurists,' *Sagetrieb*, vol.1, (1989), p.90.

forms.’⁵⁸ Loy was accepted into a predominantly male avant-garde circle of writers in Greenwich Village and appears to have fully embraced an American aesthetic. One might even say Loy was seduced by its promise of liberation. In an essay called ‘Modern Poetry’ she attempts to define an American idiom: ‘This composite language is a very living language, it grows as you speak. For the true American appears to be ashamed to say anything in the way it has been said before.’⁵⁹ Relating this American impulse to her own linguistic creations, Loy experimented with free-verse, used candid and shocking language, and raised taboo themes. She also ruptured syntax and used words as a malleable medium, often seeming to draw upon her art background and her love of painting. Moreover, in her poems words and space on the page often interconnect with one another and have equal gravitas in her work. Visually, Loy’s work is striking. Mary Galvin suggests that Loy’s ‘use of typography as integral to the poetic structure makes the page a spatial, visual event as well as an aural one.’⁶⁰ In her poetic sequence ‘Italian Pictures’, for example, she clearly displays many of these tendencies:

While listening up	I hear my husband
Mumbling	Mumbling
Mumbling	at the window’. ⁶¹

The spatial, visual event is obvious in this example – spaces denoting what cannot be said semantically – the workings of the male consciousness. Her style of expression also has the clarity and directness of a perceived American idiom. This clarity is best described by one of her contemporaries, William Carlos Williams, who claims that ‘...when she puts a word

⁵⁸ Carl Van Vechten’s editorial policy is taken from Carolyn Burke’s *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 177.

⁵⁹ Mina Loy, ‘Modern Poetry’, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 159.

⁶⁰ Mary Galvin, *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* (Greenwood Press: London, 1999), p. 61.

⁶¹ Mina Loy, ‘Italian Pictures’, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 13.

down on paper it is clean.’ However, he also noted that this ‘cleanliness’ frightened her readers.⁶² Numerous poems of Loy’s demonstrate this starkness, and are often driven by Futurist principles of technological innovation. Her poem, ‘Human Cylinders’ (1915) in particular conveys sexual intimacy as an exchange of lonely mechanical manoeuvres:

The human cylinders
Revolving in the enervating dust
That wraps each closer in the mystery
Of singularity⁶³

Despite her direct idiom, her word choice is complex. Often her phrases are difficult to read aloud as she uses lengthy words that seem awkward and ugly; this is typified again in ‘Human Cylinders’ where she uses ‘revolving’, ‘enervating’ and ‘singularity’, to name a few. So, we perceive a juxtaposition of a stark, confident, candid style coupled with lengthy, awkward words that make her poems seem hard and, at times, precocious. Again, this demonstrates her ability to self-consciously commandeer language – she steers us through spaces, combining the most un-poetic of words with irregular line lengths in order to break all poetic conventions. Indeed, if we follow the template suggested by Donald Davie in Chapter One that suggests American poetry is expansive and exciting, Loy fits the criteria perfectly. She resists the demure, ordered and metrical structuring of typical English verse at the turn of the century. She especially chooses to write about undesirable themes which was possibly a concerted attempt to rid herself of the stifling Victorian conventions that were enforced by her mother.

⁶² William Carlos Williams cited in *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*, p. 432.

⁶³ ‘Human Cylinders’, Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 40.

Despite a strong case for the American bias in Loy's work, her Anglo-American poetics are inextricable from her female preoccupations and override the compulsion to pigeonhole her as a distinct national product. Her radical poetics can just as arguably be driven by her overwhelming urge to assert herself as a strong and outspoken woman. The following poems, 'The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni', 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots' and 'Songs to Joannes' all elevate the status of women over men by offering a critique of patriarchal values. 'Songs to Joannes' was perceived as 'nothing less than lewd' by Alfred Kreymborg for its derogatory treatment of sexual relationships and the idea that women were not, in fact, asexual beings.⁶⁴ Loy also had an acute awareness of feminist politics and wrote her powerful 'Feminist Manifesto' in 1914. Despite its vibrancy and outspoken dictums it did not appear in the public domain until its (inaccurate) appearance in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* in 1982. It does, however, reveal Loy's female preoccupations and her intense dissatisfaction with the way women were viewed in early twentieth-century society. In one of her most insightful pleas she calls for women to 'Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not – seek within yourselves to find out what you are'.⁶⁵ Still having currency today, Loy's feminist politics position her as a strident woman rather than an expatriate desperate to blend into a new set of patriarchal values.

⁶⁴ Alfred Kreymborg's observations are noted in extensive appendices to Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999), p. 189.

⁶⁵ Mina Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999), p. 154.

Some of the linguistic tendencies that enable some critics to define her as an authentic American might also be seen to reaffirm her identity as a creative, autonomous women unfettered by values of nationhood. Interestingly, there is growing critical interest in the female motives for producing linguistically innovative writing. American poet, Kathleen Fraser, for example, has written a full-length study on this subject entitled *translating the unspeakable: poetry and the innovative necessity* (2000). The following example reveals the exciting connection between women poets, their rebellious impulses and the society in which they live uncomfortably:

Breaking rules, breaking boundaries, crossing over, going where you've been told not to go has increasingly figured in the writing of the contemporary woman poet as a natural consequence of the restraints placed upon her as a child being socialized to the female role her class and culture prefer. The poem becomes her place to break rank: *her* words, *her* line lengths and placement, *her* "stuff".⁶⁶

In the light of Fraser's observations and Loy's own personal negotiations with language and female identity, it is clear that the creative role is appealing for the fact that it can reclaim female authority. Yes, Loy was seduced by her American contemporaries and their artistic experimentations; but, how liberated she must have felt when she realized that the creative text was an area in which she could playfully, as well as stridently, reassert her female self. In the case of Loy, the intersection of gender and cultural duality is inextricable – without the experience of leaving London she might never have been so receptive to the poetic vehicles that allowed her a distinctly female voice.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Fraser, *translating the unspeakable: poetry and the innovative necessity* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 156.

As mentioned earlier, Denise Levertov is the only other poet in this study (along with Loy) to have expatriated from Britain to America. However, the connection between Loy and Levertov is stronger than the path of their Atlantic crossing. Levertov was also a champion of Loy's work at a time when it was out of fashion to take up such a position. Loy's reputation in America was relatively short-lived and her experiments were soon forgotten. However, in an introduction to Loy's *Lunar Baedeker and Timetables* in 1958, Levertov illustrates some of the reasons why she admires Loy's poetry. She appreciates, 'A dare-all contempt for falsification: that it hasn't killed her is a wonder. Only the kicks of fighting-to-win with the language can have kept her living – whatever the events of her own life may have been.' Furthermore, she claims, 'It is with gratitude for what I may learn that I read these poems, given back to us, something of great value that has been needed and mislaid ... The value is – indivisibly – technical and moral.'⁶⁷ Levertov wrote this introduction to Loy's work after having lived in America for ten years. She too understood the deep-rooted need to push technical and linguistic boundaries further than English poetry would allow. In fact, she had also become disillusioned with English poetry in general and confides that had she stayed she 'would not have developed very far because it was not a good time for English poetry. It was really in the doldrums, and I think I might have found it stultifying.'⁶⁸ Even her influences have been American; she has been famously connected to the Black Mountain movement and is often linked with key American poets

⁶⁷ Denise Levertov, "Notes of Discovery" *Lunar Baedeker and Timetables*, ed. Jonathan Williams (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1958). The quotation I have used, however, was not taken directly from the book itself but was an extract from a bibliography of Loy criticism that features in Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma (eds.), *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1998), pp. 554-555. This is an excellent source for Loy criticism from 1914 to 1996.

⁶⁸ 'Craft Interview with Denise Levertov', William Packard/1971, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed., Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 41.

such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and William Carlos Williams. Like H.D. she seems to have gained literary longevity as well as transatlantic respect for her poetry, either as a direct or indirect result of her connection with these influential men poets.

In 1973 Stephen Spender wrote an essay, 'America and England', in which he recalled the vivacity of American poetry in the 1940s in contrast to the apparent decline of British poetry. This seems an important essay in relation to Levertov for it mirrors the same experience that she would have been confronted with when she arrived in America in 1948. Spender writes that the allure of America lies in 'its being the centre of energies which are entirely contemporary.' Furthermore, he recalls that the American poet is 'open to the whole surrounding experience which pours through his senses and realises itself, almost spontaneously, and in forms mostly free, in his work.'⁶⁹ Levertov, disillusioned with English poetry, would have been enamoured with the truly sensual poetic experiences that were open to her on American shores. That is not to undermine the contentment and happiness of her idyllic childhood growing up in Essex. On the contrary, she recollects her childhood as being a very stimulating time: '...all in all I did grow up in an extraordinarily rich environment which nurtured the imaginative, language-orientated potential I believe was an inherited gift.'⁷⁰ To validate this further, she often writes enchanting poetry that illuminates her love for the English landscape. However, there is no denying the change in both her poetic voice and form when she moved from Britain to America. The following

⁶⁹ Stephen Spender, 'America and England', *Partisan Review*, XL, 3, 1973; this quotation, however, is taken directly from Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (eds.), in *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible* (Manchester and New York : Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 33.

⁷⁰ Denise Levertov in an introduction to her poetry in Jeni Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 77.

example is taken from one of her earliest poems, 'Folding a Shirt', which was written whilst she was residing in London in 1946:

Folding a shirt, a woman stands
still for a moment, to recall
warmth of flesh; her careful hands

heavy on a sleeve, recall
a gesture, or the touch of love;
she leans against the kitchen wall,⁷¹

This poem exemplifies succinctly Levertov's attempts at fitting her intense dialogue within the limiting poetic form that was accepted in England at the time. The first and third lines in each stanza rhyme but even at this early stage in her career one can feel her voice struggling to burst from the formal structure. Despite the tight rhythmical pressure Levertov does well to infuse the poem with so much lyrical intensity. One wonders, however, where she would have taken her reader had she not felt compelled to write with these structural impositions.

It is the poetry that Levertov produced in America that illustrates fully her potential for breaking out of conventional-looking verse and thus releasing her lyrical voice. Her collection *Here and Now* (1957) was the first to be published in the United States and won her high praise from reviewers and her contemporaries alike. Kenneth Rexroth hailed her as 'the best poet' in 'what is getting to be known as the new avant-garde.'⁷² Whilst staking an early claim on her literary status in nationalistic terms, James Wright suggests that, 'She

⁷¹ Denise Levertov, 'Folding a Shirt', *Collected Earlier Poems: 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p.

⁷² Kenneth Rexroth, 'The Poetry of Denise Levertov' in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 11.

difference in expression between Levertov and Whitman's poem, 'Song of Myself': 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.'⁷⁵ In contrast, Levertov's voice self-consciously falters at times, not to reveal her immaturity at manipulating the language, but to illuminate the vulnerability and fragility of human experience. This reveals a deeper honesty, or openness, perhaps, than we have witnessed in some of the more self-consciously 'American' voices.

If it is at all possible to talk about specific American tendencies in Levertov's poetry then they become most apparent in her unique experimentation with form, although one senses that these were not really experiments for Levertov; her ruptured lines and intermittent use of space on the page seems so natural. It is as if she has simply stumbled upon a craft that sets her voice free – there is never a sense that she considered the task of structuring a poem to be a pre-meditated dismantling of form simply for the sake of art. Levertov writes extensively on what she sees as an almost transcendental process of writing poetry in 'Some Notes on Organic Form' (1965). She claims that the poem begins by deep stirrings of human experience after which it is possible for the poet 'to contemplate, to mediate' upon these experiences. After this process, Levertov claims that the first words of the poem present themselves and there the poem is conceived.⁷⁶ Poetic form is, according to Levertov, only possible after meditating upon the subject – it is not pre-conditioned or seen

⁷⁵ Walt Whitman, 'From Song of Myself' in Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*: Fourth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 961.

⁷⁶ Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', reprinted in *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 8.

as a set template to rigidly follow. In the last interview she conducted before her death she reiterates this: 'Critics always talk in such a deliberate way as if poets write with the same methodology that people write criticism. One doesn't write poetry that way, or fiction.'⁷⁷ Levertov rather disputes the idea that poets and their poetic practices are also guided by literary nationalisms. In a liberating stance she implies (and this can be seen in the poetic practices of most of the poets in this study), poets are driven by an inner impulse to inhabit poetry rather than being driven by national impositions, even though they are often self-consciously aware of them.

Levertov is intent on inhabiting poetic form in order to capture aspects of natural and human experience which transcend national and cultural boundaries. One of her poems, 'The Tide' (*The Jacob's Ladder*, 1965) exemplifies perfectly how form is used, not as a national/cultural signifier, but as a means of recreating the sensation of waves reaching out across the sand and receding once more.⁷⁸ Levertov's 'waves' build up momentum and then slacken in pace in her varying and dissolving line lengths. Some of her lines run over into the next quite smoothly, at other times the pauses become stilted as if to indicate that the speaker has stopped to listen for the inevitable change in tempo: 'I hear/ the tide turning.' There is also a parallel thread running through the poem – the 'ebbing dreams' and 'half-awakening' images coupled with the typography that mimics the tide all seek to evoke the sensation of drifting in and out of sleep. The effects she sought to achieve can

⁷⁷ 'Levertov's final interview', 'A Poet's Valediction' by Nicholas O'Connell, Online Source <http://www.pw.org/mag/levertov.htm> [Accessed 6th May 2006]. Originally printed in Nicholas O'Connell, *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers* (University of Washington Press, 1998).

⁷⁸ Levertov's poem 'The Tide', *The Jacob's Ladder* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), for example, displays a superb rupture of poetic form – each line emulates the inconstant incoming and outgoing waves of the sea.

also be verified in her last interview where she speaks of T.S. Eliot's limitations: 'he comes to a slump at the end of every line,'⁷⁹ she writes. Levertov's passion for freedom of speech in every sense of the word is exemplified in her use of enjambment, randomised line-lengths and elliptical tendencies – they breathe life into her poems. Levertov has fared relatively well in terms of straddling the divide between British and American poetries. She is well-respected on both sides of the Atlantic and her poetry has appeared in a considerable number of mainstream anthologies on both shores. Considering Britain's apparent aversion to poetry that experiments with form this is perhaps surprising. However, Levertov is the one poet who proves that form and idiom do not dictate a poet's literary standing alone – her poetry reaches beyond these technicalities and touches readers with the depth of her understanding of what it sounds like, looks like and feels to be human.

Gender does not necessarily complicate Levertov's sense of artistic and cultural self in the way that it does with Loy. Levertov, unlike Loy, was, from a young age, always certain that she was 'an artist-person and had a destiny'.⁸⁰ As such, her poetry is rarely about projecting a sense of self into the public domain but more about embracing human experience in all its variables. Being a woman, or more to the point, feeling like a woman, is the key to Levertov's gendered politics. Sandra M. Gilbert defines her feminist standing most succinctly:

Though she is not an aggressively feminist poet, she is very much a woman poet, or perhaps, more accurately, a poet conscious that the materiality of

⁷⁹ 'A Poet's Valediction', A last interview with Denise Levertov conducted by Nicholas O'Connell, *Poets and Writers Magazine* (May/June 1998).

⁸⁰ Denise Levertov in a brief introduction to her poetry in Jeni Couzyn (ed.) *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 77.

her life as a woman is not matter to be transcended; it is material in which poetry is immanent.⁸¹

In 'The Lovers', the poem referred to earlier, we perceive the human experience of a woman in love. Every particle and being of the female speaker wants to rejoice in the love that she feels for her partner. At the same time, male/female relationships are not necessarily harmonious for Levertov – she perceives the destructiveness of desire between men and women too. 'The Ache of Marriage' (*Poems 1960-1967*, 1983), for example, explains how the search for fulfilment in the union of marriage is a double-edged sword in that it allows no escape from the two entwined selves:

It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of
the ache of it.⁸²

This suggests a more visceral rather than activist response to womanhood and marriage. Yet Rachel Blau DuPlessis has identified how Levertov often uses myth as a necessary tool to express the trials of womanhood from a less oblique perspective. DuPlessis also implies that the creative writing process is vital to women in that it allows them space to 'soul-make'. Drawing upon Levertov's 'Hypocrite Women' (*Poems 1960-1967*, 1983) DuPlessis reads it as a poem that criticizes women 'who, concerned simply with pleasing men, tailor

⁸¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Revolutionary Love: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Politics' in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 202.

⁸² Denise Levertov, 'The Ache of Marriage', *Poems: 1960-1976* (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 77, lines 8-13.

their responses to ignore messages of myth and dream ...'⁸³ The poem in itself is interesting in that it speaks about women generically rather than embracing individual experiences:

Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak,
Of our own doubts, while dubiously
We mother man in his doubt!

This poem does convey a highly politicized voice in Levertov and even has a tinge of Loy's stridency. Interestingly, when discussing gender and poetry, critics – such as DuPlessis and Fraser – speak about poets finding ways of breaking boundaries in order to write themselves into the text of the poem. Loy and Levertov are examples of how gender is often inseparable from nation and culture and validates the importance of discussing the two in connection.

The American-Britons: H.D. (1886-1961), Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991), (Ruth Fainlight (1931-), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), Anne Stevenson (1933-), Anne Rouse (1954-) and Eva Salzman (1960-)

The following group of poets all crossed the Atlantic from America to Britain.⁸⁴ In this respect and in the light of the debates that stress the experimentation of American poetry as opposed to the traditionalism of British poetry, one might expect to see conservatism at play in the poetic tendencies of these poets. Yet, H.D. and Laura Riding, in particular, have been important voices in twentieth-century poetry in terms of radical poetics. As an

⁸³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich and Rukeyser', in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 218.

⁸⁴ Anne Stevenson was born in England but moved to America with her parents when she was just six months old. Seeing as her formative years were spent in America I prefer to see her as an American-Briton.

expatriated Briton, Levertov looks to H.D., as well as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, as role models for avant-garde poetics in her adopted land of America. In her poem 'September 1961' she writes:

They have told us
the road leads to the sea
and given

the language into our hands.⁸⁵

Evocative of H.D.'s *Sea Garden* collection (1916), Levertov commends these poets for offering the gift of language to a new generation of writers searching for new ways of expression. She acknowledges that the terrain is often 'obscure' but concludes optimistically that 'we think the night wind carries/ a smell of the sea ...' (lines 44-45). Clearly, H.D. was an influence upon the young Levertov even though she moved to Britain in 1911. However, she reveals an impulse that is not as ferociously intent on resisting the literary conventions of her homeland in the way a poet like Loy was. H.D.'s good friend, Norman Holmes Pearson, claimed that she was '...completely American,' and that 'she never thought of herself as anything but that.'⁸⁶ Another of H.D.'s close companions, Winifred Bryher, also mirrors this view: 'Her long residence in Europe merely intensified her love for her native country and to me she has always been the most American of poets.'⁸⁷ It is reported that H.D. only returned to America six times after leaving in 1911, yet these recollections from her confidantes suggests that she was very much at ease with her birth origins and her American identity.

⁸⁵ Denise Levertov, 'September 1961', *O Taste and See* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 10, lines 22-25.

⁸⁶ 'Norman Holmes Pearson on H.D.: An Interview', *Contemporary Literature: Special Number on H.D.* (Autumn 1969) vol. 10, no. 4, p. 441.

⁸⁷ Winifred Bryher's recollections of H.D. are recorded in Janice S. Robinson, *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), p. 81.

Critics have generally relegated H.D.'s poetry to the Imagist movement as prescribed by Ezra Pound, despite the fact that she and Amy Lowell later made a clean break from Pound's ethos. On a personal and stylistic level it was crucial to H.D. and Lowell's artistic integrity to make the break with Pound. Nonetheless, the association with Pound has probably done H.D. little harm in terms of her visibility in literary mainstreams. Imagism has always been a commercially viable strand of modernism, and as such, even though H.D. and Amy Lowell are often overshadowed by the male modernists, they manage to straddle the Atlantic in a way that a linguistically vigorous poet like Loy never could. H.D. appears in Imagist anthologies as well as in both American mainstream collections and generic anthologies by British publishers.⁸⁸ However, when comparing H.D. with Loy it becomes apparent that there are anomalies when attempting to position her within a distinct national canon; for even though H.D.'s poetry is strikingly different to Loy's, they both uphold an American literary persona. Like Loy, scholars on H.D. have never labelled her 'British' in respect of her adopted home or even 'Anglo-American', even though they acknowledge the influence she had in portraying an Anglo-American dialogue of early modernism. An American/British interface at play in her work is outlined in an extensive summary of H.D.'s life and works by the Poetry Foundation: 'While the urban world of London gave H. D. the freedom to write, the natural world of *Sea Garden* was rooted in her mother's garden, the fields and woods of Upper Darby, and the shorelines of Maine, New

⁸⁸ I mentioned previously that H.D. has never been considered within a British canon of poetry, although this is true, she does feature in Fleur Adcock (ed.), *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 35-38 as well as Germaine Greer (ed.), *101 Poems by 101 Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) p. 124. Both these books are published by British publishers and thus intended for a British readership.

Jersey, and Rhode Island.’⁸⁹ Despite the contrasts in her poetry – her clarity and use of free verse as well as her encodings conveyed through metaphor – she is still considered an ‘American’ and has never appeared in any anthology or poetry collection which suggests an alternative perspective. H.D. highlights the ambiguous nature of the Anglo-American poet, sometimes conforming to one poetic tradition and at other times blurring these boundaries completely. What is clear is that H.D. loved America, she also loved being an American, yet her poetry reveals her reluctance to conform solely to either Imagist or American principles.

Whilst not self-consciously reacting to or resisting a particular literary nationalism, H.D. conveys most profoundly a poetic voice that is wholly individual even within the parameters of Pound’s strict Imagist doctrines. Andrew Thacker even claims that H.D. and Amy Lowell, in particular, ‘define an experience of “modernity” which seems to occupy a contradictory relationship to Poundian Imagism.’⁹⁰ Thacker also sees this contradiction manifesting as a gendered subjectivity rather than the required distancing from the subject that is associated with male imagist poets such as T. E. Hulme who describe the Imagist ethos as ‘hardness, as of cut stone. No slop, no sentimentality.’⁹¹ In many ways, this hardness, this directness even, as conveyed by the male imagists, is similar to other narratives that attempt to define an American idiom. When reviewing Helen Farish’s poetry collection, *Intimates*, it was claimed that the influence of American poets, Sharon Olds and

⁸⁹ Poetryfoundation.org: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80773> [Accessed July 2007].

⁹⁰ Andrew Thacker, ‘Amy Lowell and H.D.: The Other Imagists’, *Women: A Cultural Review* (vol. 4 no. 1), p. 51.

⁹¹ Andrew Thacker making reference to T. E. Hulme in ‘Amy Lowell and H.D.: The Other Imagists’, *Women: A Cultural Review* (vol. 4 no. 1), p. 51.

Louise Glück can be seen in Farish's 'deceptively simple, open language ...'⁹² Furthermore, in his introduction to *Major American Poets to 1914*, Francis Murphy claimed that the best in American art was 'bold and vigorous, perhaps [also] as Auden noted "too cranky, too earnest, too scornful of elegance..."'⁹³ H.D. is complex when considered in light of the Imagists and attempts at defining American poetics – on the one hand, she too, is direct and open:

You are clear,
O rose, cut in rock,
hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour
from the petal,
like spilt dye from a rock.⁹⁴

'The Garden' is one of H.D.'s earliest poems and appeared in *Some Imagist Poets* (1915). Subverting some aspects of the masculine ethos of Imagism, this poem is resolutely feminist in its approach. H.D. seizes the image of the rose which is generally a metaphor for love and displaces this in her aggressive inspection of a petal. H.D. verbally annihilates the symbol of the rose and its associations by rendering it lifeless – without colour and voluptuousness. Yet H.D. seems to partially appease the Imagists' desire for *vers libre* despite her visible desire to unsettle and obscure the purity of the image as Pound would have it.

⁹² Anonymous reviewer in *pbs bulletin*, Summer 2005, no. 205, pp. 8-9.

⁹³ Francis Murphy (ed.), *Major American Poets to 1914* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1966), p. xx.

⁹⁴ H.D., 'Garden', *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 24.

Yet, in other poems she is self-consciously obscure. 'The Gift', also an early poem, is an elusive piece of work that hints at more than the simple title reveals:

Do not dream that I speak
as one defrauded of delight,
sick, shaken by each heart beat
or paralyzed, stretched at length
who gasps:
these ripe pears
are bitter to the taste,
this spiced wine, poison, corrupt.
I cannot walk ---
who would walk?
Life is a scavenger's pit---I escape---
I only, rejecting it,
lying here on this couch.⁹⁵

This poem is, in many ways, evocative of Charlotte Mew's 'To the Sea' in which the speaker conveys an intimate dialogue of a love not fully reciprocated. What makes Mew's poem all the more subversive is that it also implies a lesbian love that can not be explicitly articulated in the climate of Victorian England. 'The Gift' offers similar encodings – a lover, worn to the point of decay, by the unattainable female subject. There is also a sense that H.D. is re-enacting her own passion for women in the guise of an anonymous speaker; the poem never fully indicates the identity of the speaker. We know the subject must be female for she wears a string of pearls that snap. Even the gift itself is ambiguous: 'I send no string of pearls,/ no bracelet---accept this.'⁹⁶ H.D., like Mew, also peppers her verse with enigmatic questions: 'I cannot walk---/who would walk?' As revealed in this poem, she often subscribes to an ambiguous style of expression that appears dismissive of the Imagist mantra of clarity. Her female and lesbian undercurrents and layers of meaning perhaps

⁹⁵ H.D., 'The Gift', *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 16.

⁹⁶ H.D., 'The Gift', p. 18.

indicate H.D.'s appreciation of the ways in which the English character was sceptical of direct, open speech. She recognises that her intimate portrayal of a relationship (possibly between two women) would still largely be seen as unacceptable and thus adopts a more demure and reserved style of expression. It is her use of *vers libre* that allows her to ignite passion and intensity without exposing too much of her private self. She discards the small, neat looking stanzas that were deployed in 'The Garden' and intersperses her words with frequent ellipses. These pauses are poignant in that they occur at the moment when the speaker is seen to be faltering under the enormity of her passion – they signify the point at which loss cannot be expressed into words.

In terms of H.D.'s gendered preoccupations, there has been some interesting criticism produced on the positive elements of cultural duality and gender. However, scholars have documented a desire in modernist poets to expatriate in order to create a space in which they could write freely. Even though H.D. seems to have a stable perception of her upbringing and truly enjoyed immersing herself in the beautiful Pennsylvanian landscape of her childhood, some critics argue that the poetry she produced in London could never have been written in the presence of certain authority figures that invaded her life in America. Scholars such as Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham recognise the creative freedom that H.D. and other modernist women writers found in their expatriation. Broe and Graham theorise this in the introduction to their edited collection, *Women's Writing in Exile* (1989) :

To escape the "immediate suffocation of America," apparently inescapably placed in her poetry and her life between William Carlos Williams and Ezra

Pound ...H.D. exiled herself to London, finding creative space in her poetry and a more personally expressive space in her prose.⁹⁷

Broe and Graham define a reconfiguration of H.D.'s literary self in pre-war London. Shari Benstock, however, is more specific in that she claims that H.D. and several other modernist poets saw expatriation as 'a flight from the implicit expectation of marriage and motherhood; very frequently it meant a journey toward a sexual orientation other than heterosexual.'⁹⁸ It is clear that expatriation afforded H.D. and other poets like her, the freedom to express a female and creative self that could not have otherwise been expressed. While H.D. does not display the frenzied desire to erase her cultural origins to which Loy subscribes, she does, like her contemporaries, push the boundaries of language further in order to inhabit a textual space where the female self might be freely expressed.

Like H.D., Laura (Riding) Jackson also moved from America to England and became a key figure in modernist circles. However, unlike many of the other Anglo-American women poets she had already developed a literary reputation in America and expatriated to Britain in 1925 for the sole purpose of collaborating on a book with Robert Graves at his request. Together they produced *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) which highlighted early on her aptitude for exacting textual analysis. Riding had an intensely analytical mind and having been influenced by two distinct poetries and partially acknowledged by two critical establishments she provides illuminating insights into what she sought to achieve in her

⁹⁷ Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham (eds.), *Women's Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 7.

⁹⁸ Shari Benstock, 'Expatriate Modernism: Writing on the Cultural Rim', Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham (eds.) *Women's Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 28.

poetry. More than any of the other poets, she is deeply aware of the complex relationship between a national poetic identity, a modernist sensibility and transnational concerns. In the introduction to *The Poems of Laura Riding* she offers a retrospective assessment of her work:

I was, indeed, an American poet. My birth-placement and scene of growing-up have had effect in the personal mood of my life and work. In my responses, to cause of circumstances, I am unreservedly open to impression, my feelings frank in the quality of their occurrence in me, and ready for call upon them to manifest themselves; I am prompt in my responses of feeling, in the American manner of treating what is immediately there as personally immediate.⁹⁹

Again, the American idiom is defined as being open, frank, direct – and in terms of an urgency or immediacy that she argues is one of the defining characteristics of American poetry. Interestingly, she also points to the significance of her formative years in America and perceives this time as being directly responsible for her own individual mode of expression.

Many of Riding's poems invoke immediacy in their style of expression, yet at the same time verbalise an abstraction that is resistant to immediate understanding. This is illustrated, primarily, by winding a problem up tightly only to unravel it and expose it as inconclusive. Her poem, 'Yes and No' is a superb example of this – even the title conveys the impossibility of verbalising truths or resolutions. The poem speaks of the prospect of an 'imaginary continent', where unidentified beings might roam without being noticed:

Ah, the minutes twinkle in and out
And in and out come and go

⁹⁹ Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p.11.

One by one, none by none,
What we know, what we don't know.¹⁰⁰

The speaker in the poem refers to the possibility of not recording into language the existence of a living subject and considers the prospect of its 'unwritable decease'. One question she ponders is: if this particular existence has never been articulated into words does it make it any less significant – any less meaningless? Her speaker concludes simply: 'What we know, what we don't know', and implies equal gravitas in the knowable and the unknowable. The state of being human is ultimately inconsequential – for what we know and the words we use to convey this do nothing to change the passage of time. Jane Dowson suggests that, 'At times, she appears to anticipate the infinite circularity of the post-structuralist in dismantling her own discourse.'¹⁰¹ And this is paramount as she strikes at something like a grain of truth and then proceeds to unwind it. As well as transmitting a style of expression that is honest and direct, Riding is also overwhelmingly committed to exploring the modernist concerns with the vulnerability and fallibility of human nature. This subject in itself is made all the more tantalizing by virtue of the readers witnessing the problem as it evolves – its twists and turns, its knowings and unknowings. The fact that she so often speaks in the abstract and does not tend to signify meaning with specific words is what her poetry is about. Reading Riding's poetry one becomes aware that to gather some semblance of meaning is to piece together whole sentences and ideas and to recognize that this is just as easily unwound.

¹⁰⁰ Laura Riding, 'Yes and No', *The Poems of Laura Riding*, new edition of *Collected Poems*, 1938, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p.

¹⁰¹ Jane Dowson (ed.), *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 98.

Riding, then, much like H.D., is another poet who often resists strict national templates with regards to her poetry and her approach is riddled with paradoxes. As we have witnessed, she is direct and she is oblique – she is also a stickler for crafting poetry as well as taking the non-conformist approach of using free verse. Also, with Riding, we sense that her dislike of absolutes relates to the way in which her poetry is perceived. Her following response elicits her disregard for ‘placing’ her on one side of the Atlantic or the other:

My individual character inclines to the general in the forms in which it expresses itself. This might be viewed as a propensity to conventionalism ... In my poetic, and in my other writing, I am given to maintaining a serene (though it might seem prim, or on the other hand, anxious) hold on the reins of consistency. None of this spells me as American, but neither does it spell me as a non-American.¹⁰²

Riding is keen to stress her own ambiguous approach to poetic form – she admits she ‘inclines to the general’, to the conventional. Furthermore, she is aware that this may be seen as prim, anxious, even. This is in great contrast to a poet like Loy, for example, who resisted conventionalism at all costs. Moreover, it is in Riding’s structural tendencies that we see the ways in which she most consistently blurs the boundaries between perceived British and American poetic forms. In later years, Riding was very conscious of the fact that her work resisted categorisation which she confides in a letter to her UK editor at Carcanet Press, Michael Schmidt, in 1980: ‘My poetic work, as all the other work, of all the years of my working life, has been treated as it has very much because it was not and is not formed within the literary, the categorically literary moulds of value.’¹⁰³ The conscious

¹⁰² Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p.11.

¹⁰³ Letter written by Laura Riding to Michael Schmidt (editor at Carcanet Press, Manchester) on April 12 1980. This particular item was correspondence that was communicating her instructions for the forthcoming

efforts to evade literary nationalisms can be seen in most of her poetry. In her poem, 'In Due Form', for example, she conveys a romantic exchange between speaker and subject. Yet even within this highly charged atmosphere her poetry, in terms of form, is restrained:

I do not doubt you.
I know you love me.
It is a fact of your indoor face,
A true fancy of your muscularity.
Your step is confident.
Your look is thorough.
Your stay-beside-me is a pillow
To roll over on
And sleep as on my own upon.¹⁰⁴

Whereas H.D. conveys the intensity of her emotions with a passionate overflow of words, Riding reins in her feelings within short, direct, dead-weighted sentences. Any enjambment that occurs is due simply to her precise quota of words and not to convey an overspill of emotion. Clearly, Riding is utilising free-verse, but not, I would suggest, to its full potential. Admittedly, her cadence is irregular, her use of rhyme is also sparse if not non-existent, yet there is also a sense that she is holding back. Dowson suggests that, 'Laura Riding was one of the most adventurous stylistically.'¹⁰⁵ Dowson's book places Riding within the context of women in Britain in the 1930s, so within a literary climate that was mostly hostile to *vers libre* of any kind, it is admirable on her part to rid herself of tight, metrical verse. Yet, when placed within the early modernist context of Loy, H.D., Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein, Riding's attempts to challenge orthodox forms seem rather feeble in comparison. Riding's strengths lie most profoundly in her

publication of her *Collected Poems* in the UK. Riding's correspondence with Carcanet Press can be found at the Rylands Library in Manchester.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Riding, 'In Due Form', *The Poems of Laura Riding*, new edition of *Collected Poems*, 1938 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p. 130.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Dowson (ed.), *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 99.

aptitude for thinking around deep and spiritual questions which is illustrated in Steven Meyer's response to her poetry:

In later years, Riding recalled that in the "English and cross-Atlantic literary atmosphere" of the mid-twenties, she found a "solitariness in which to probe the reality of poetry as a spiritual, not merely literary, inheritance." This solitude was accompanied, however, by a public reception that emphasized the literary rather than the spiritual side of her inheritance.¹⁰⁶

What Meyer identifies is the way in which Riding chooses to blur literary boundaries despite the desire of establishments to 'place' her within a genealogy of like-minded poets. Like the other poets in this chapter, she does not always play ball – stylistics seem secondary to a poet like Riding, and ultimately this undermines her position as an American poet writing at the height of modernism. Yet, the honesty and frankness with which she conveys even the most spiritual of themes might not be perceived as wholly British either. As a result, she has been the biggest enigma in terms of her appearance in later publications of poetry. This may be due to her rather prickly character and especially her disdain for appearing in anthologies or women-only collections, despite an insistent preoccupation with female themes such as beauty, the female image and love. However, even if she hadn't wished to exclude herself from these literary records, and we made a judgment based solely upon her style of poetic expression and form, it would be an impossible task to make her 'fit' in either British or American canons. Whether she would approve of the more embracing Anglo-American framework proposed here, however, is an interesting proposition.

¹⁰⁶ Steven Meyer, 'An ill-matched correspondence: Laura Riding's Gertrude Stein,' *Raritan: a quarterly review* (19:4) [Spring 2000], pp.159-170.

Ruth Fainlight is also an American-born poet who, having spent her formative years in America, has now lived in England longer than anywhere else. Despite her popularity in Britain and her evident assimilation of English poetic form and style she still teases out the problems of her geographic identity. Like Levertov, she makes it apparent that her sense of cultural awareness is often blurred; in a recent interview she states that ‘when I was in America I was regarded as English, and when I was in England I was regarded as American.’¹⁰⁷ With the emergence of these complications it is not surprising that these poets were carving literary personas that made them impossible to tie down and it is within this indefinable critical arena that they seem to find, and indeed, actively seek, creative freedom.

Fainlight appears relatively conventional on the surface; her use of form is often conservative and tight in appearance, especially in her earlier work. Her 1966 *Cages* collection, for example is brimming with neat looking poems – yet they are mostly written in free verse with an emphasis on cadence rather than strict metrical schemes. She manages to weave a technical element into her poetry by playing intriguingly with patterns of assonance and partial rhyme. In ‘A Child Asleep’ she conveys haunting resonances of the fragility of human life; the poem is comprised of two tight five-lined stanzas, yet within these tight parameters only two lines within each stanza rhyme. This is exemplified in the following example:

To see the skull beneath the skin
Of a child’s head
Is seeing death clear.

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Fainlight interview conducted by Melanie Petch, April 2004 (see appendix).

The power that makes those bones appear
Will not spare anyone.¹⁰⁸

Despite the relatively conventional stylistics deployed in this poem Fainlight can, on occasions, be intensely experimental with her use of poetic form – a characteristic that is rarely commented on. Even her recent *Burning Wire* collection (2002) is interspersed with poems that defy our expectations of traditional form. Her poem ‘Potatoes’ is written in three solid stanzas of prosaic density – half poem, half-prose, yet not entirely a typical prose-poem either. Her epic poem, ‘Sheba and Solomon’, is an eclectic mix of various poetic styles. On the other hand, other poems such as ‘Song’ and ‘Insistence’ resemble one of Levertov’s poems – long sweeping lines followed by a tiny tail-end right aligned beneath:

I never thought I would be writing about the moon
at my age
nor that a full moon could still keep me awake,
restless, excited,¹⁰⁹

This example illustrates Fainlight’s ability to keep her poetry moving – developing, growing – and because she has established a position within mainstream British poetry she also has the added advantage that even her distinctly experimental work will be read. In a recent interview with scholar Lidia Vianu, when Fainlight was asked whether she set out to deliberately innovate the old craft of poetry, she responded:

[I] have always tried to write as well as possible, to improve my technical skills, because the more fluent one is – like an athlete trained to the full stretch of her potential – the more possible it is to express the most subtle perceptions and emotions. To me, the possibilities of form, structure and

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Fainlight, ‘A Child Asleep’, *Cages* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Fainlight, ‘Insistence’, *Burning Wire* (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 23.

subject in the English language are limitless, and the more I read of English poetry, and poetry in other languages, whether in the original or in translation, the vaster and more boundless the field of poetry becomes.¹¹⁰

Clearly, Fainlight is enchanted by the possibilities of form, structure and subject and considers it her duty to improve her technical skills. This approach, inspired by British traditionalism and American experimentation, allows her to traverse the divide almost imperceptibly. Unlike the poets mentioned previously, Fainlight is intensely playful with poetic form – sometimes conventional, sometimes not – when examined closely, her poetry resists categorising to such an extent that it is a wonder that she is only placed in British canons.

Fainlight attributes her popularity in Britain more to the logistical difficulties in travelling to America to promote her work, yet she still retains a distinctly American identity, something which she is keen to uphold. In a recent interview she admits that she was secretly pleased when poet Adrienne Rich assumed she was a thoroughly American poet and not one who had lived in England for most of her life. For Fainlight this is an important affirmation of what she calls a ‘really crucial and essential’ part of her identity.¹¹¹ Indeed, Fainlight’s direct, open voice is another point that validates her Anglo-American identity above her British standing. Her style of expression is resonant of Plath’s (they were good friends during the years leading up to Plath’s death), in the sense that it is self-critical, open, and ruthless in her portrayal of the roles of wife, mother and poet. Again in *Burning Wire*, she interposes fictional and mythical narratives with highly intimate accounts of

¹¹⁰ Ruth Fainlight interview conducted by Lidia Vianu, http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/ruth_fainlight.htm [Accessed July 2005].

¹¹¹ Ruth Fainlight interview conducted by Melanie Petch in April 2004 (see appendix).

motherhood and grandmotherhood ('My Mother's Eyes'), her cultural heritage ('The English Country Cottage') and her familiarity with strangers ('Stranger'). She clearly has a strong female bias at work in her poetry. Poems such as 'Domestical' and 'Knives' in particular present the unattainable perfection women crave in order to please men. Fainlight acknowledges that she had her first feminist moment at the age of six in response to a family member who was scathing of little girls. Yet, Fainlight is also able to articulate the problems of being a woman in the sixties:

I didn't have the burning desire to succeed and be perfect that Sylvia Plath had, definitely not. It was always much more dubious and oblique and sceptical, my response to those pressures. But it was an enormous problem for me. I don't know any woman who doesn't have them.¹¹²

Furthermore, Fainlight decidedly dislikes labels of any kind and prefers not to be straightjacketed into frameworks she sees as limiting: 'I don't really want to be called an American poet, or an English poet, or a Woman poet, or heaven forbid, a Jewish poet. I am an English Language poet ...'¹¹³ Despite the confusion surrounding the myriad layers of her literary identity, she readily admits that, 'A specifically female anger has been the impetus for many of my poems. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the 'negative capability' of the poet extends beyond/below/above gender. I am a poet who is a woman, not a woman poet.'¹¹⁴ Interestingly, Fainlight perceives her femaleness as being something that is at times separate from the process of writing poetry. 'Female anger' emanates in some of her poems but Fainlight suggests that it is not necessarily instrumental in driving the creative

¹¹² Ruth Fainlight interview conducted by Melanie Petch, April 2004 (see appendix).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ruth Fainlight in an introduction to her work in Jeni Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 130.

writing process; from her perspective it is not a specifically female action. In terms of Lefebvre and Kristeva's spatial theories that suggest the imaginative potential of the poem, I would argue that Fainlight *is* able to free herself imaginatively within the text in a way that would not be possible in material conditions. Later chapters will elucidate this further and argue that Fainlight is indeed a poet who benefits from the creative dynamic at work within the text, particularly as a woman of dual cultural status.

However, Fainlight is a truly enigmatic Anglo-American, born in America yet raised as a child on both sides of the Atlantic; deploying the conventional tidiness of British forms at times, yet also the radical manipulation of language at others, coupled with a direct, at times, confessional, style of expression. As we have seen, she also openly dislikes labelling of any kind and prefers to be seen as an 'English language poet', yet she is proud of her American heritage. Her cultural duality obviously enlivens her craft as a poet as it enables her to dip into two distinct discourses in order to produce a body of poetry that is ambiguous and playful in technique as well as allowing her the autonomy she clearly desires that is unfettered by distinct nationalisms.

Without doubt, Sylvia Plath has been the most popular of all the poets in this study. Since her tragic death, Plath's biography and poetry have always been commercially viable options for publishing houses and editors of anthologies; thus she sits relatively comfortably on both sides of the literary playing field. However, with so much interest in Plath's life and her work it has become almost impossible to read her with fresh eyes – she is seen as the tragic victim and tortured wife of Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, feminist icon,

compulsive perfectionist and voracious writer. Tracy Brain's book, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001) however, offers an illuminating perspective on Plath as a poet of cultural duality; one of the only areas in her life that has been neglected amidst the struggle between Britain and America to possess her. Refreshingly, Brain chooses not to position her on one side of the Atlantic or the other as she believes that: '...what makes Plath's work so compelling is that it retains some material residue of a voice that moves *between* England and America.'¹¹⁵ This sense of 'betweenness' is an interesting phrase and applies to all the poets in this study to varying degrees. Plath often seems to resist this betweenness and in her stylistic tendencies, at least, she reveals her American background slightly more than those of her adopted British land. Plath affirms this in an interview with Peter Orr in 1962: '...as far as language goes I'm an American, I'm afraid, my accent is American, my way of talk is an American way of talk, I'm an old-fashioned American.'¹¹⁶ Her husband, Ted Hughes, also defines the essence of her poetic practices in American terms in a piece of criticism in which he responded to Plath's *Ariel* collection. He writes that in these poems:

...she controls one of the widest and most subtly discriminating vocabularies in the modern poetry of our language, and these are poems written for the most part at great speed, as she might dictation, where she ignores metre and rhyme for rhythm and momentum, the flight of her ideas and music. The words in these odd-looking verses are not only charged with terrific heat, pressure and clairvoyant precision, they are all deeply related within any poem, acknowledging each other and calling to each other in deep harmonic designs.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Tracy Brain, *The Other Plath* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), p. 45.

¹¹⁶ 'A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr', *Modern American Poetry*: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm [Accessed April 2004].

¹¹⁷ Ted Hughes on Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* in Clare Brown and Don Paterson (eds.), *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2003), pp. 219-221.

All Hughes' comments point to a poet who was influenced by an American literary heritage. Hughes defines a musicality to her work which is exactly the appeal that Loy found in the American language: 'Modern poetry, like music,' she says, 'has received a fresh impetus from contemporary life; they have both gained in precipitance of movement.'¹¹⁸ Hughes, a poet who was deeply tied to a longstanding pastoral tradition and highly metrical style of English poetry, also perceives Plath's poems as 'odd-looking verses'. Hughes makes clear in his choice and tone of language that Plath's poetry was somewhat different to his own and the poetry that he was accustomed to reading. The conflict in critical opinion must have been somewhat oppressive in the Hughes' household as Linda Wagner-Martin reports that Hughes himself 'makes clear that he looks askance on the turmoil of the new in the United States poetry scene' and in a letter to W. S. Merwin Hughes warns him to stay clear of the influence of William Carlos Williams.¹¹⁹ Plath, on the other hand, like Levertov, was inspired by Robert Creeley who was, she acknowledged, an important and influential poet for his 'direct, humorous idiom'.¹²⁰

Plath was a keen observer of the way American poetry was taking shape in the early twentieth century. She stresses her similarities to Imagistic principles by revealing that, 'I am closest to Amy Lowell, in actuality, I think.'¹²¹ This is reinforced by her analysis of her own poetic techniques; she writes: '... I do want to explain why I use words, each one chosen for a reason, perhaps not as the very best words for my purpose, but nevertheless,

¹¹⁸ Mina Loy, 'Modern Poetry, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), p. 157.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 137.

¹²¹ Karen V. Kukil (ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 88. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 88.

selected after much deliberation.’¹²² This accords with Pound’s ‘A Few Don’ts’ in his ‘A Retrospect’ essay: ‘Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something. ... Use either no ornament or good ornament.’¹²³ This imagistic strain is rather a prominent feature in twentieth-century poetry by women and is a neglected area of criticism which warrants further attention.

And yet, despite this overwhelming evidence to suggest that Plath gained all her methods from American poetries and none from British, it is impossible not to find some of her poetry beautifully drawn from the English landscape and the natural world. Her poem, ‘Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows’, for example, describes the English landscape endearingly as ‘a country on a nursery plate.’¹²⁴ Furthermore, it would be hard to ignore her sensual relationship with the English countryside in ‘Blackberrying’: ‘These hills are too green and too sweet to have tasted salt.’¹²⁵ Likewise, her famous ‘Bee Poems’ capture superbly the customs of a rural English community – much like Rouse, Plath is a keen lover of, and a participant in, the English way of life. So although, stylistically, Plath’s poems point towards perceived American trends, her themes and observations are very much centred upon the strange and beautiful country she found herself in.

¹²² *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 88.

¹²³ Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’ in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 4-5.

¹²⁴ Sylvia Plath, ‘Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows’, *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 112, line 15.

¹²⁵ Sylvia Plath, ‘Blackberrying’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 169, line 22.

As for her female impetus, Plath understood more deeply than any of the poets the frustrations of combining wife and motherhood with a successful literary career. This theme is one that echoed throughout her poems and journals. Jeannine Hobbs also points to the number of poems that were connected with the mental state of a female subject. 'Paradoxically', Hobbs claims, 'it is out of her domestic relationships and experiences, which she came to feel were stifling, even killing her that the majority of her most powerful, most successful work was created.'¹²⁶ Indeed, these preoccupations might also be seen as the key to her wide readership, as Linda Wagner-Martin suggests: 'One of the reasons both Sexton and Plath had such immense readership very early in their careers was the hunger of women readers for work that spoke to their experiences and needs.'¹²⁷ In a period driven by images of domesticity and female perfection, Plath projected a fresh voice that reflected women's concerns with the current state of play. Unfortunately for Plath, many of these very real, very intimate, female experiences became more than she could handle and she became an example of the tragic writer/mother for scholars seeking to condemn Hughes and patriarchal values in general. Whereas other women in this thesis are more successful in affirming female experience, Plath's contribution is important, nonetheless, for speaking honestly about the bleak moments of a woman writer; today we live in a climate that seems intent on undermining these personal confessions and thus critique is silenced.

¹²⁶ Jeannine Hobbs, 'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry, *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1977, p. 11.

¹²⁷ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke and London: 1999), p. 136.

Bearing in mind that this chapter addresses the variability in the writing of Anglo-American women poets, Anne Stevenson also brings her own unique tendencies to the debate. She is described by Dana Gioia as the 'finest American woman poet-critic of her generation now active.' Gioia uses the term 'American' ironically because Stevenson 'has been shamefully neglected by her native land.'¹²⁸ More liberally, Cynthia Haven, hails her as a decidedly 'British-American phenomenon'.¹²⁹ Indeed, one can understand the problems of placing Stevenson in a national framework, as with the other poets, for her poetic techniques are not really self-consciously motivated by nation but are driven more from the absolute desire from within to create a piece of art. Stevenson describes this succinctly in an interview with Haven:

...writing a poem is like conducting an argument between your unconscious mind and your conscious self. You have to get unconsciousness and consciousness lined up in some way. I suspect that's why working to a form, achieving a stanza, and keeping to it—deciding that the first and third and fifth lines will have to rhyme, and that you're going to insist on so many stresses per line—oddly helps the poem to be born. That is, to free itself from you and your attentions to it and become a piece of art in itself. Heaven only knows where it comes from! I suppose working out a form diminishes the thousands of possibilities you face when you begin. And once you've cut down the possibilities, you can't swim off into the deep and drown. Well, it's a very, very strange process.¹³⁰

The imaginative process is paramount to Stevenson as she describes it as starting in the unconscious but only being suitable for the public domain after it has been stylized into an appropriate form for the job. As with Levertov, Stevenson seems to take an organic approach to poetic form and speaks about linking the unconscious and conscious self – the

¹²⁸ Dana Gioia, 'Anne Stevenson Poet-Critic', *The Way You Say the World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson*, compiled by John Lucas and Matt Simpson (Beeston: Shoestring Press, 2003), p. 33.

¹²⁹ Interview with Anne Stevenson conducted by Cynthia Haven, *The Cortland Review*, Issue 14, November 2000 – Online source: <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm> [Accessed December 2004].

¹³⁰ Ibid.

subject and the form or the imaginary with the rational. Stevenson has little time for the limitations of certain literary stereotypes. She reminds us that: 'So much strong feeling goes into shifts of direction or fashion in the arts that it is easy to forget that no one time or culture has ever had a monopoly on excellence.'¹³¹

Stevenson's own views on her poetic techniques are ambiguous and with reference to the binaries we examined in Chapter One, she certainly doesn't fit neatly into either American or British critical landscapes. On the one hand she suspects that 'there isn't really such a thing as free verse. Or if there is, I don't think I've written any.'¹³² Notably, her poem 'The Fiction Makers' (*The Fiction Makers*, 1985) shunned Pound's attempts at 'squeezing the Goddam iamb/ out of our verse.'¹³³ Yet, on the other hand she also claims that 'it's good to get away from the straightjacket of over-strict meters.'¹³⁴ In between these opposing views that Stevenson holds, it is clear that she strives for individuality in her poetry. As with all the other poets there is a musicality to her work that is funded on her ability to use inner rhyme (assonance and alliteration) – a poetry produced from what she calls 'speech sounds and rhythmic patterns derived from rhythms of heartbeat and footsteps ...'¹³⁵ Evidence of this musicality can be seen throughout the whole body of her poetry which is superbly collected in *Poems: 1955-2005*; this collection does not follow the usual chronological path

¹³¹ Anne Stevenson, 'A Few Words for the New Century' (2000), W.N.Herbert and Matthew Hollis (eds.), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 183.

¹³² Interview with Anne Stevenson conducted by Cynthia Haven, The Cortland Review, Issue 14, November 2000 – Online source: <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm> [Accessed December 2004].

¹³³ Anne Stevenson, 'The Fiction Makers', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 20, lines 15-16.

¹³⁴ Interview with Anne Stevenson conducted by Cynthia Haven, The Cortland Review, Issue 14, November 2000 – Online source: <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm> [Accessed December 2004].

¹³⁵ Anne Stevenson, 'A Few Words for the Next Century' (2000), W.N.Herbert and Matthew Hollis (eds.), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 183.

of other collected poems as it is arranged thematically. The thematic arrangement illustrates how Stevenson's stylistics – her inner ear – remain constant even though the themes and subject matter are constantly evolving. There are many poems by Stevenson that would support this argument, but one for example is the evocative first stanza of 'Theme with Variations' (*Travelling Behind Glass*, 1974):

Distractions, considerations.
There are so many.
There is money.
There are possessions.
There are the professions and inventions.
And there are the men alone,
and forever those
soft thighs thought of and thought of
in empty rooms.
For there is only one love –
which is never enough.¹³⁶

True to her word, this poem is not governed by over-strict metres, yet it is not entirely without regularity. There are inner rhymes and sounds that can be seen in the words 'possessions' and 'professions', as well as 'thighs thought of and thought of' with 'love' and 'enough'. Her poem has an enchanting echo which reveals how technically adept she is at crafting poems with an inner ear, yet it is not quite loose and totally natural enough to qualify as free verse either. It is clear that her technique is an individual product. And so, Stevenson evades distinct nationalisms which are evidently inappropriate for poetry of this nature.

¹³⁶ Anne Stevenson, 'Theme with Variation', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 286, lines 1-11.

Stevenson's poetry often elucidates very clearly certain experiences that arise directly from being female. I think of obvious poems like 'The Mother' (*Reversals*, 1969), 'Five Poems of Innocence and Experience' (*Travelling Behind Glass*, 1974), 'Night Thoughts and False Confessions' (*The Other House*, 1990), 'Politesse' (*Four an a Half Dancing Men*, 1994), and 'Four Grimm Fairy Tales' (*New Poems*, 2003-05). What is especially significant is that although these specifically female-centred poems span Stevenson's entire poetic career, she questions the role that gender should play in poetry. Stevenson's article 'Outside Histrionics' responds to the backlash of criticism she received for condemning Eavan Boland's narrative of the Irish woman poet as outsider called 'Outside History'. Stevenson was particularly offended by Boland's cultural and female 'outsider' stance mainly because she feels that 'nationalism and women have become cults in today's world, and where there are cults there are bound to be stereotypes.'¹³⁷ Fundamentally, Stevenson believes that: 'Such matters, consciously brought to mind by the culture we live in, are extraneous to poetry.'¹³⁸ Ultimately, Stevenson is saying that regardless of her status as an Anglo-American and as a woman, her poetry is unaffected by her personal status in the wider world. By contrast, the argument in this thesis conveys how the textual space of the poem becomes a site where a multitude of scenarios – cultural and female specific, as well as others – can be re-imagined. Stevenson does this herself, as later chapters will argue. Within the poem she is able to inhabit two nations simultaneously (see Chapter Three and a reading of her poem 'Green Mountain Black Mountain') as well as unite the inner dialogues of the male and female mind (see Chapter Four). To say that the essence of these

¹³⁷ Anne Stevenson, 'Outside Histrionics' *PN Review*, May/June 1993, p. 40.

¹³⁸ 'Outside Histrionics', p. 41.

poems has nothing to do with the experience of living in and between two nations and of being a woman is to underestimate the creative possibility of the poem.

Contemporary poet, Anne Rouse, is another poet who demonstrates the richness and variability within this genealogy of Anglo-American women writers. She is an American-born poet who, having moved to England at the age of eighteen, has lived here longer than anywhere else. In all three collections of her poetry (*Sunset Grill*, 1993; *Timing*, 1997; *The School of Night*, 2004), she evokes the Virginian landscape of her childhood alongside the cityscapes of London. When she began writing poetry she claims that she attached herself to Pound's Imagist dictums of condensation until she realized that 'poems occasionally failed to breathe, and had to be discarded.'¹³⁹ Endearingly, she also openly admits to having had a literary love affair with England long before she arrived. She attributes this 'to children's books such as the Green Knowe stories and C. S. Lewis. Later, British pop music –especially the Beatles – "Penny Lane" intrigued me. It seemed to be written in a secret language.'¹⁴⁰ This secret language had such an impact upon Rouse that she even goes as far as to say that she sees London as her 'adopted imaginative home.'¹⁴¹ Again, we see how expatriation releases the creative potential for poets like Rouse. She sees the text itself as a place where alternative realities can co-exist: 'I'm very conscious of the theatricality of poetry, but it's also a form of private musing, and it has to be honest to come across.'¹⁴² The poem is both a site of performance as well as being a profoundly intimate space where the

¹³⁹ Interview with Anne Rouse conducted by Melanie Petch in February 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Interview with Anne Rouse.

self can be explored and revealed. Again, we see the allure of the poem to writers; it is an imaginative site where a positive dynamic is initiated in exploring what it means to be an artistic expatriate woman.

Unlike some of the other poets, who at times see the notion of Englishness, particularly in a literary capacity, as rather irksome, Rouse also conveys a sincere appreciation for her adopted home. Even her satires such as 'Cat Fancy' and 'England Nil' (*Sunset Grill*, 1993) take on an entirely fresh perspective in light of her passion for England and English culture. She makes clear that she always writes 'from the point of view of a participant in, and lover of, the culture'.¹⁴³ Rouse's use of poetic form often pays homage to English forms – she deploys neat-looking poems and experiments with the traditional forms of an English literary heritage. She adapts the framework of the sonnet (again, 'England Nil') and in the concrete poem 'Starlings' (*The School of Night*, 2004). She also deploys the tight villanelle in order to convey the insistent repetition of certain themes that have potentially unsettling undercurrents; for example, 'Success' (*Sunset Grill*) in which her speaker conveys the painful imaginings of a runaway bride, and 'Her Retirement' (again, *Sunset Grill*) which illuminates a secretary's sinister retirement speech. Rouse always seems to manipulate these forms in an attempt to show how subversive and effective they can be. Even when she is not consciously adopting a distinct poetic form, her poems are always framed as conventional-looking poems – she is never tempted to rupture syntax and line-lengths in the way that Loy or Levertov so obviously do.

¹⁴³ Interview with Anne Rouse – February 2006

Despite her willingness to embrace and experiment with conventional English forms, Rouse has struggled to gain acceptance into the British literary community. She was overlooked when the new crop of New Generation poets was announced under the banner 'Next Generation' (interestingly, Salzman was included). Furthermore, Michael Bradshaw, when reviewing her second collection *Timing* for *The Richmond Review*, claims that 'Rouse lapses on occasion into 'poetic diction' as well as viewing her attempts 'at English vernacular [as being] horribly strained'.¹⁴⁴ Unfortunately Bradshaw perceives Rouse's homage to English forms and diction as being unnatural and forced, whereas with the prior knowledge of Rouse's love of English literature, we, on the other hand, might perceive her work as a mark of respect to the adopted country that she has loved since childhood. Some of the contentions surrounding Rouse's work may be due to her amalgamation of British and American dictions. She adopts a strong London – or even Cockney – accent in several of her poems 'We couldn't unload our lot,/ burned most of 'em, poor/ buggers,'.¹⁴⁵ In other poems, she occasionally dips into an American vernacular too. Words such as 'reckon', 'copped', 'parking lot' and 'shack' all belie her American heritage. Perhaps because of these overwhelmingly complex Atlantic cross-currencies, even British critics that admire her work are hard pushed when it comes to placing her; Sean O'Brien includes one of her poems 'The Hen Night Club's Last Supper' in his influential *The Firebox* (1998) yet intimates that she is 'hard to place in any grouping.'¹⁴⁶ And here again lies the main problem for Anglo-American poets; there simply isn't an arena where both poetic

¹⁴⁴ Michael Bradshaw, *The Richmond Review* [<http://www.richmondreview.co.uk/books/rouse.html>]. *The Richmond Review* was established in October 1995 as the UK's first literary magazine to be published exclusively on the World Wide Web.

¹⁴⁵ Anne Rouse, 'Blitz', *Timing* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997), p. 28, lines 3-5.

¹⁴⁶ Sean O'Brien (ed.), *The Firebox* (London and Basingstoke: Picador, 1998), p. 421.

influences on both sides of the Atlantic can be recognized and openly and candidly discussed. Rouse is placed, often reluctantly, in British formations but she is then condemned for trying too hard to 'mimic' the English. She is currently in the process of trying to find an American publisher for her work which will prompt further interesting discussions on her critical reception in America.

One might expect to find the later generation of Anglo-American poets having a diminishing preoccupation with female and feminist matters. Yet, as later chapters will show, there is a strong case for seeing these modern poets in terms of their awareness of the problems they encounter in a world they still perceive as patriarchal. In a current climate that sees young women embarrassed to be seen as feminists, Rouse openly admits that this movement is still an important part of her personal make-up: 'As to whether a feminist impulse drives my work - there is one, but it's not the whole story. Feminism is an essential and valued critique, but I see poetry as an affirmation.' Furthermore she suggests: 'One has to acknowledge that pain and that repression as it affects other women, world-wide, and affected oneself in the past.' Interestingly, Rouse stresses the importance of female repression as an issue that affects all women and not just herself. She also raises another important point about the imaginative potential of the poem, particularly in connection with being a woman: 'It's possible to reinforce one's own confidence and determination through reading, thinking and periods of achievement---that imaginative space again.'¹⁴⁷ Undeniably, the power of the text is paramount to these poets – an imaginative playground where they can assert a sense of self that is simply not always possible in material

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Anne Rouse.

conditions.

Eva Salzman is a contemporary poet of the same generation as Anne Rouse, and like Rouse her transatlantic journey volleyed her from America to Britain. She moved to Britain in 1985 and has lived there (apart from brief visits to New York) ever since. Like Rouse, Salzman was also seduced by the literary appeal of Britain and Europe:

I ... held on to an idealized view of the European intellectual, considering England as part of Europe; hell, it never occurred to me that someone wouldn't *want* to be part of Europe! And I carried on my literary love affair with England. My first readings were 18th and 19th century novels, mainly English. I took my time joining modern times, living in a sort of (mainly) Victorian bubble.

Again, the imaginative thread that draws these poets abroad is paramount. To voluntarily exile oneself holds such appeal for these women that it becomes an impossible motive to ignore. The threat of ambiguities of nationality is a small price to pay it seems. And again with Salzman, we perceive how these ambiguities are detailed by her reviewers. Australian-born poet living in Britain, Peter Porter, writes that:

She is, of course, a New Yorker, but such is the universal catchment area of poetry now that her living and writing in Britain does not make her either an American or a British Poet, but simply a very good one. Perhaps, though, her wit, directness and fresh approach to language, whether fierce or lyrical, may be seen as American qualities. I stress this sharpness towards language, the very edginess of words themselves, since her poetry is always daring yet realistic ...¹⁴⁸

Clearly, Porter is reluctant to label Salzman yet he also detects an obvious American bias in her work. Porter, it seems, is sensitive to Salzman's own frustrations with being labeled;

¹⁴⁸ This Peter Porter review can be found on Eva Salzman's website:
<http://www.writersartists.net/esalzman.htm> [Accessed May 2004]

she is passionate about retaining a sense of autonomy and feels uncomfortable with the inevitable 'placing' that comes with residing on British shores:

I've always felt nationality to be something imposed on me. Maybe you also feel it when it's endangered. The English seem particularly deft at putting you in your place in this way. Since I've lived in the UK, I've been turned into an American, turned into a Jewish writer, turned into a woman writer (that becomes a tag too) – anything, but simply a writer.¹⁴⁹

Uncannily, Salzman almost paraphrases Fainlight's earlier comments on her critical reception and placing of her as a poet. She perceives negativities with regards to literary identities on both sides of the Atlantic. On the one hand, she claims that she has never felt such a foreigner as when she is living in England and despises the obsessive desire of the British to label poets. On the other, she is also sceptical of an American climate where everyone seems to be writing poetry.¹⁵⁰ Salzman is undecided on whether she dislikes too much labeling or not enough, perhaps.

The stylistic techniques she deploys are often an amalgamation of perceived British and American practices. She deploys a rather loose villanelle in 'Power Games', neat little quatrains in 'Promising' and 'Hatred' (all in *The English Earthquake*, 1992), and offers a beautiful sonnet in her 'Brooklyn Bridge' (*One Two II*, 2002). In 'Helen's Sister' (*One Two II*) she utilizes the heroic rhyming couplet in order to omit humour in the face of being the 'ugly' sister: 'Once they know I'm beauty's twin/ at the party door I'm in'.¹⁵¹ At other times, Salzman is just as assured in her use of free-verse. Salzman's poetry is a mixture of

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Eva Salzman conducted by Lidia Vianu: January 28 2003
[http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/eva_salzman.htm].

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Eva Salzman, 'Helen's Sister', *One Two II* (Brough: Wrecking Ball Press, 2002), p. 38, lines 1-2.

styles and influences; she has been likened to Plath on several occasions as well as Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. David Herd of *The New Statesman* suggests that 'Her American voice swaggers sassily across the proprieties of English metre, pricking the bloat of monumentalism, and pointing up the slangy contingency of things.'¹⁵² And certainly, a number of adjectives that reviewers choose to describe her voice – 'swagger', 'sassy' 'sardonic' – all lean towards an American narrative. Salzman is another poet who prefers to adopt a combination of styles which she knows will make her impossible to pin down. Indeed, straddling the Atlantic is a 'place' she rather likes being. When asked in a recent interview whether she 'belonged' to British or America poetry, she replied: 'Maybe one of the hallmarks in my work is a mid-Atlantic suspension. Or Nowheresville.'¹⁵³

In terms of her female and feminist impulse, Salzman is also clear in her understanding of what it means to be a woman poet in today's climate. She argues that:

There's also this big protest among women writers that, hey, we write like writers, not like women, which is true enough, but I think some women writers are deliberately and strategically adopting a style (I never understood this cold-blooded quest for style...) which is masculine. They're reacting against the sort of male reviewer who may find us "enjoyable" or "promising", but saves his heavyweight adjectives of depth and profundity for the guys. Women who write about love and family are "domestic", while men are writing about the "big subjects".¹⁵⁴

There is a definite female leaning in much of her poetry, particularly in her recent collection, *Double Crossing: New and Selected Poems* (2004). Yet, she doesn't portray the female as a victim in the way that Fainlight and Plath might; rather Salzman empowers her

¹⁵² A selection of reviews of Salzman's work can be found on the Writers and Artists website: <http://www.writersartists.net/esalzman.htm>

¹⁵³ Interview with Salzman conducted by Lidia Vianu.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Salzman conducted by Lidia Vianu.

female subjects by transplanting them into fiery mythical or biblical figures. Even her 'domestic' poems are concerned with romantic and sexual liaisons and suggest a mutually satisfying exchange rather than one based upon the oppressor and the oppressed. (Chapter Four deals with Salzman's treatment of the home and domesticity in greater detail) Nonetheless, it is clear that Salzman and Rouse do not feel that the pressures of womanhood have dissipated. Instead they see it their duty to find imaginative ways of empowering women; again, it is becoming increasingly clear that empowerment can be achieved within the textual space of the poem.

Women, Writing and Voluntary Exile: The Creative Dynamic

As we have seen, the variables at play among this selection of poets and their poetry is broad in scope. At the beginning of the chapter I began to stress the significance of the relationship between women as cultural outsiders and how these two states of being often contributed to a powerful and positive creative dynamic. Based upon the understanding we have gained from the poets' individual ways of expatriating, their complex Anglo-American practices as well as their female preoccupations, I now want to assess why the desire to create is so strong for poets such as these. Numerous scholars have commented on the creative benefits of leaving one's homeland to reside abroad. Andrew Gurr writes specifically upon the concept of home to exiled and expatriate writers and suggests that: 'Distance gives perspective, and for exiles it is also the prerequisite for freedom in their art.'¹⁵⁵ He suggests that solitariness and distance are actively sought as a rather contrived means of enhancing one's artistic career. Steve Clark and Mark Ford have also identified a

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 17.

need in some poets to 'avoid being contaminated by a "mainstream" they despise and tend to exult in their very exclusion...'¹⁵⁶. Clark and Ford refer mainly to writers of other traditions in Britain, but I think this can apply to some of the poets here. Being outside the literary mainstream is appealing and lends the poets an element of mystery. Think of Fainlight and Salzman who were determined not to be tagged with national labels; Salzman even suggested a mid-Atlantic dimension to her work. This might be seen as an attempt to keep both sides of the critical terrain interested but it might just as likely be the need to inhabit somewhere outside the limitations of the mainstream, somewhere on the margins.

In terms of women poets, I would argue that having understood the experience of living in a society still largely governed by patriarchal values makes them more susceptible to the creative possibilities of living life as an outsider abroad. Stevenson, a poet who disagrees with being defined by both nation and gender might be sceptical of this argument and her views are important for the fact that they could dismantle all that I am trying to say here. However, drawing upon the interesting work by Carolyn Heilbrun, Stevenson's views might be justified in the light of Heilbrun's own reservations about feminism. She writes that: 'Feminism, in literature as in life, has either moved women, or tried to move them, from the margins closer to the centre of human experience and possibility or has made evident their absence from that centre.'¹⁵⁷ With this in mind, it is understandable why stereotyping women might feel such a hostile practice; for they are being made to confront

¹⁵⁶ Steve Clark and Mark Ford (eds.), *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 12.

¹⁵⁷ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Women's Lives: The View From the Threshold* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 3. This text is presented as a series of four lectures.

full on their sense of difference. Yet, rather than choosing to ignore gender in an attempt to pretend that the differences don't exist, as I think Stevenson is implying, Heilbrun suggests an alternative form of empowerment – through the process of writing literature. She notes that: 'The threshold ... is the place where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays.'¹⁵⁸ If a poet like Stevenson, for example, who sees herself at no disadvantage as a woman so already writes from the centre, she does so as an ungendered subject. Heilbrun, however, would argue that the centre is subconsciously interpreted with a patriarchal perspective which would make Stevenson unaware that she writes with a patriarchal view of the world. I am not entirely convinced that Stevenson really sees gender as being irrelevant to writing poetry: she does as we already know, frequently use poetry to articulate female difference. Stevenson's confusions as well as the allure of writing to the expatriate woman are clearly defined by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham. They write:

Enabled on one hand, to write, to create new worlds and to recreate what should have been home, many writers find the other hand shackled by the expectations and rules of the world of words they have chosen to inhabit. For some, however, the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in finding a place to write are at least partly resolved by finding a "home" in writing itself.¹⁵⁹

To some extent, Stevenson is perhaps shackled by the values she has assimilated in England, yet for all the poets there is a sense that poetry can produce a dynamic that is enlivened by both their gender and expatriation. Loy and H.D. both felt liberated enough to re-imagine female sexuality in the text or 'home' of their poetry. And Loy's radical use of

¹⁵⁸ Heilbrun, *The View from the Threshold*, pp. 101-102.

¹⁵⁹ Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham (eds.), *Women's Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 5.

language was certainly an amalgamation of female and cultural forces. Fainlight, Stevenson and Salzman all feel strongly that they don't want to be straightjacketed into certain categories and complicate their poetic status enough to playfully resist national impositions. For Levertov, Plath and Rouse the overwhelming desire to create in order to affirm a sense of self is paramount and we sense that although cultural duality can be disorientating at times, there is solace to be found in the artistic process of writing a poem.

It is clear that the variables within this group of poets and their poetic practices make it impossible to homogenise them. All of them display unique practices that make them stand alone as Anglo-American poets. Often they aligned themselves with male-led movements such as Dadaism, Futurism and the Black Mountain Group, but in doing so they manipulated the characteristics of these groups to create their own distinct style, often interconnecting these practices with a female impetus. At other times some of the poets can be tied in little clusters; H.D., for example, was part of the driving force behind the Imagistic principles of the early twentieth century, yet the legacy of imagism can also be traced most notably in the work of Plath, Fainlight and Rouse. Riding as a poet stood alone and outside much literary criticism with her later rejecting poetry all together in protest that it was unable to express depth of meaning. Yet she forms a connection with Stevenson through their shared hatred of being seen as a woman poet. Above all we can see how these poets collectively complicate an American/British critical axis that perpetuates oppositions and binaries. At times, it is true, the poets can be placed within these frameworks and fit comfortably – but only up to a point. Loy, for example, is a necessary focal point when discussing the avant-garde movement in bohemian Greenwich Village in the 1920s. Yet,

complicate her innovative stylistics with her feminist politics and the critical map needs realigning.

The variability and complexity in this writing does, however, demand ways of linking the poets and their practices in the succeeding chapters. As outlined in Chapter One, the unifying link between each and every one of the poets is their preoccupation with certain recurring spatial themes. The following chapter builds upon the contextualisation of the poets' range of poetic practices to show how place itself can impact upon their sense of self as writers, women and expatriates. Ultimately it shows how the potentially displacing experience of moving in and out of Anglo-American locations can be re-imagined and soothed within the poem. For the most part, any separation anxiety caused by living in and between two cultures can be healed and reconfigured within the poem. Chapter Three becomes the starting point for an investigation into how the text can be re-appropriated by the woman expatriate to show a positive and creative dynamic at play. The poems in the following chapters illuminate how two nationalities, rather than being disorientating, accentuates the desire to create a female space. The following chapters all reinforce the idea that the imaginary realm of the poem is an alternative and, indeed, much sought after place which is ripe for navigation.

Chapter Three

Anglo-American Locations

For the Anglo-American woman poet, the experience of living in and between two cultures produces some evocative representations of location from the perspective of an outsider. The condition of the cultural outsider comes about after having expatriated from one's homeland; after which point, it is clear that she can neither 'belong' to America nor England, a condition illustrated by contemporary American-born poet Eva Salzman: '...being an outsider in England has made me an outsider back home too...I've become the foreigner in my own country - America being strange to me in precisely the way England used to be.'¹⁶⁰ Yet far from being viewed in negative fashion, the plight of the Anglo-American poet can be read as a creatively energising experience which is illustrated by the way the poem is used to harmonise the experience of not belonging; the poem becomes a textual space in which places can be reconfigured and re-made and can offer a resolution to the disorientating experience of cultural duality. Furthermore, to demonstrate the positive aspects of this vantage point, most of the poets in this study *chose* to live life as an outsider – as someone in-between cultures. Their exile was, in other words, *self-imposed*. Levertov and Salzman expatriated for the sake of romantic partnerships. Intriguingly, H.D., Loy, Riding, Plath and Rouse all crossed the Atlantic for the allure of literary freedom or to further their education in the study of literature. Only Stevenson and Fainlight had less

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Eva Salzman conducted by Lidia Vianu, January 2003. [http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/eva_salzman.htm].

choice in that they moved from America to England with their parents as young adolescents. Salzman emphasises the idea that being an outsider is creative by saying that '... feeling the "outsider" is the writer's habitual condition!'¹⁶¹ As the motives for expatriation suggest, a significant number of these poets sought to elevate their already 'other' status as writers – aware that within the depths of cultural difference too, a rich source of poetic inspiration could be unearthed. As suggested earlier in the thesis, we must also bear in mind that this role of 'outsider' is one that women in particular are adept at commandeering. Indeed, the Anglo-American woman poet could be said to face a triple sense of outsiderdom – as an expatriate, as a writer and as a woman. The appeal for women writers to find comfort as an expatriate is a richly covered area which has yielded numerous studies by feminist literary critics.¹⁶² For example, Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham write:

Voluntary-exile, something of a luxury when we consider it closely, constitutes for a number of writers an escape from the entrapping domain of the silenced mother-under-patriarchy, the manifestation of women's internalized exile/estrangement.¹⁶³

Put simply, we might deduce that the 'outsider' status of the writer is preferable to being a gendered outsider in one's native land; yet a literary profession is one that provides a suitable terrain for the woman already doubly excluded. Moreover, even though this

¹⁶¹ 'Vianu and Salzman in Dialogue'

¹⁶² See for example, the work carried out on expatriation and women writers by: Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987), Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop and Louise Glück* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992), Donna Hollenberg, 'Abortion, identity formation, and the expatriate writer: H.D. and Kay Boyle', *Twentieth-Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, Vol. 40: Iss. 4 (Winter 1994), and 'Norman Holmes Pearson on H.D.: An Interview', *Contemporary Literature* (special number on H.D.), Vol. 10: No. 4 (Autumn 1969).

¹⁶³ Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Graham (eds.), *Women's Writing in Exile* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 5.

chapter focuses upon representations of location – specifically places in America and England – the poems often betray an undeniably gendered discourse. Often, maternal metaphors, references or symbols illustrate a preoccupation with the female self within a broader cultural context, thus suggesting that to be an outsider is equally a condition that is determined by gender as it is by being a writer.

When it comes to articulating the way space is conceptualised in this chapter I will draw upon the work of Lefebvre who offers a fruitful theoretical framework. Despite its limitations with regards to the consideration of women, Lefebvre provides a way of articulating the difficult concept of space – he provides useful terminology with which to describe something that threatens to become, according to Andrew Thacker, ‘so semantically vague as to be shorn of all value in critical discussion.’¹⁶⁴ In Chapter One I outlined a triad of terms that Lefebvre uses to categorise space. It was suggested that Lefebvre’s reference to ‘representational spaces’ are most useful when applied to poems and the way poets can imaginatively negotiate their world. ‘Representational spaces’ are, according to Lefebvre, ‘the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.’¹⁶⁵ For the poets featured in this chapter then, the way space is imagined is a liberating way to challenge conventional thought, given that it is difficult to censor one’s imagination. To be more explicit still, in Anglo-American terms, these

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 39.

representational spaces or poems are a way of undermining the idea that cultural duality must only evoke the negative experience of displacement. Rather, the unifying elements of both 'Anglo' and 'American' are yoked together to form positive and regenerating experiences of belonging to two cultures. It is worth unpicking Lefebvre's theory and taking it one step further, representational spaces are not merely imaginative and abstract, for the physical act of writing text gives a concrete form to these re-imaginings. Lefebvre implies that imaginative spaces overlay actual physical spaces, yet this is where he perceives the process ending – with the imagination. He fails to acknowledge the significance of the final product – the poem – as a textual, and thus physical space, in its own right. Literary symbols, richly evocative in Anglo-American women's poetry, therefore become a concrete way of commenting on the status quo. To reiterate further, this chapter will use Lefebvre's theories of representational spaces to specifically illustrate how women poets use their writing to inhabit or harmonise the Anglo-American location.

Given that poems are a way of appropriating dissatisfaction with the current social order, it is now important to assess the relationship between place and poetry. Thacker also considers the interplay between place and space in order to detail the significance of representational spaces as imagined by modernist writers. He writes: '...a writer's conception of some particular place should be understood in relation to the wider historical and social meanings of that site.'¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, place is laden with 'its own ideology and

¹⁶⁶ Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 19.

politics.’¹⁶⁷ If geographical places are governed by social codes then it would seem that when the poet appropriates this space and re-imagines it, the poem itself becomes an exciting site where dominant ideologies and politics can be subverted. Moreover, the outsider can *imagine* a life for herself and then record it as text even though it would be impossible to physically live her imaginings out in material conditions – she is in effect re-possessing what she sees to be hers. Without doubt, Lefebvre offers a critical vocabulary that alerts us to the manipulation of something essentially intangible, yet his study also has its limitations; the main one being that he fails to explore the semantic potential of the text, particularly in relation to gender.

In terms of place and the woman poet then, this chapter explores the literary devices used to implicitly challenge the world as it is socially and hence linguistically constructed. Literary techniques and symbols which thread through the poems are often used to offer alternative visions of geographical places within America and England. The poems in this chapter also indicate how imagery and the use of literary symbols often evoke maternal preoccupations, thus enforcing the necessity of understanding place in gendered terms. The art of place-making, as we shall see in this chapter, is sometimes an intimate account of how the bond between poet/speaker and a maternal figure can be reconfigured – of how roots to one’s literal birth-mother and, indeed, one’s *motherland* can either be restored or transferred.

In terms of the poetic re-imaginings of place, I have had to limit my inclusions to poems that speak solely of America and England. This was for two reasons: firstly, the vast

¹⁶⁷ *Moving Through Modernity*, p. 19.

quantity of poems on place would have provided me with too much material to work with within the confines of this chapter; all the poets in this study are deeply and profoundly affected by the places they inhabit and, significantly, these places are not necessarily of an Anglo-American leaning. A large proportion of the poets write about European towns and cities where they spent significant periods of their lives.¹⁶⁸ Other poems refer to metaphorical countries in order to illustrate dystopic and utopic visions of a world that *could* or *should* be.¹⁶⁹ Other places of interest are as far reaching as Tangier and Mexico. Above all, this chapter looks at the poetry which can be seen to harmonise the transition between living in America and England and clearly offers some fertile observations on the double cultural identity of the poet. Furthermore, the poets betray a sense that the Atlantic crossing is the most profoundly affecting of all their journeys; this is typified by Denise Levertov who writes: 'I so often feel English, or perhaps European, in the United States, while in England I sometimes feel American...'¹⁷⁰ Although each of the poems in this selection expresses an individual voice from the perspective of the cultural outsider, I have detected four common areas that frame this chapter: firstly, comparisons between America and Britain, which illustrate specifically the attempt to attune the experience of living between both nations and the desire to establish a cohesive sense of self in the world; secondly, visions of America, which convey the ambiguous and sometimes affectionate

¹⁶⁸ For example, Mina Loy writes poems that chart her time spent in Vallombrosa in the Florentine district in Italy; see her poem 'Italian Pictures'. She also represents Mexico in other poems. Laura Riding was influenced by the Mallorcan village of Deya. Fainlight is also affected by the Mallorcan landscape as well as the Tangiers.

¹⁶⁹ Salzman and Stevenson are particularly adept at expressing the dual complexities of metaphorical places: see Stevenson's poem 'Two Countries', *Reversals* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969) and Salzman's 'We Who Have No Country', *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992).

¹⁷⁰ Denise Levertov in an introduction to her poetry in Jeni Couzyn ed., *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 76.

views of America from both native and foreign vantage points; next, the visions of England also show the ways in which the idealised image of England often fails to live up to one's expectations, particularly in the poems by American-born writers; and finally, Jewish inflections in English culture, which demonstrate the tensions that poets of Jewish identity have when inhabiting typically rural middle-class England.

Oscillating between American and English Locations

This first selection of poetry charts the process of bringing together the experiences of living in and between America and Britain. Interestingly, the poems present the idea that whilst the poet cannot physically be in both countries at once, she can create a space where she can imaginatively co-exist between the two nations.¹⁷¹ Moreover, the representational spaces that are imagined by the poet are often an attempt to harmonise the disruptive experience of cultural duality. Anne Stevenson offers her reader a vivid contrast between Powys in Wales and Vermont in the States in one of her recent poems, 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' (*A Report from the Border*, 2003). After a lengthy career that spans five decades to date, this recent poem accentuates Stevenson's conflicting emotions of being caught between two cultures, despite her having expatriated to England in 1954.¹⁷² It seems

¹⁷¹ Another interesting example of co-existing imaginatively between two nations is Stevenson's poem 'American Rhetoric for Scotland'. In this poem she offers a different Celtic variation on her Anglo-identity by referring to Scotland rather than Wales, however, significantly, her speaker conveys the dual perception of place: 'shrugged off into Queensland, Ontario, Birmingham ... Others borrowed Cleveland, Toronto ...' (lines 27 and 30). *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 106-107.

¹⁷² This was not Stevenson's first experience of expatriation; at six months old her American parents (residing in Cambridge, England, at the time) moved back to Harvard where her father was an influential academic in philosophy. However, for the benefit of this study, it is important to acknowledge that Stevenson's formative childhood and adolescent years were spent in America. She also made return visits to America after 1954 although only for brief visits.

that she utilises the art of place-making in order to soothe the often deep-rooted sense of conflict she feels with regards to her expatriation.

On a basic level the poem conveys the geological differences between the two landscapes, both marked by the imposing image of a mountain. Considering the geographical references to Vermont and Border Powys, it would be easy to deduce that the two mountains symbolise two very different geological aspects – Stevenson’s green mountain being typical of the landscape in the National Forest conservation area in southwestern and west-central Vermont; her black mountain, on the other hand, offers an image of a group of hills which constitute part of the Brecon Beacons National Park in south-eastern Wales, with a singular peak actually called the Black Mountain.¹⁷³ However, despite Stevenson having physically lived amidst the imposing landscapes of both these locations, at times, her representations of the two places become indistinguishable from the other. Emily Grosholz notes that Stevenson’s ‘home country is uncertain, and the tensions between Here and Elsewhere in her writing remains unresolved.’¹⁷⁴ ‘Green Mountain Black Mountain’ typifies these ‘unresolved’ tensions superbly and demonstrates Stevenson’s attempt to use Lefebvre’s idea of representational spaces to harmonise the two locations. The following example illustrates the way in which the two cultures become interposed; the speaker has just offered a rain-soaked image of a Welsh wood when a momentary lapse of

¹⁷³ Both Vermont and Powys are two places which are poignant enough for Stevenson to detail in another of her earlier poems titled ‘The Parson and the Romany: A Black Mountain ballad to a Green Mountain tune’, *The Collected Poems: 1955-1995* (1996); the poem was composed in 1982 and clearly anticipates ‘Green Mountain Black Mountain’.

¹⁷⁴ Emily Grosholz, ‘The Poetry of Anne Stevenson’, *The Way You Say The World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson* (Beeston: Shoestring Press, 2003), p. 48.

consciousness prompts her to say, “‘Vermont’ I want to call it.’ (line 77).¹⁷⁵ This example shows the slip of the tongue as highlighting how the two places can be recalled simultaneously – the image of Wales with the consciousness of Vermont. Via the representational space which seeks ‘to change and appropriate’ actual space, Stevenson has re-made her own vision of the duality of place and has clearly redrawn the boundaries between past and present, home and away. A further example also supports the argument that this poem is a way of re-imagining a space where she may love and loathe both places at once:

In dread of the black mountain,
Gratitude for the green mountain.
In dread of the green mountain,
Gratitude for the black mountain. (lines 203-06)

This repetition of ‘dread’ and ‘gratitude’, ‘black mountain’ and ‘green mountain’, in this stanza echoes throughout the poem, but crucially indicates how both landscapes are inescapable from the other. Stevenson has re-imagined two places entwined with a speaker who is consumed with dread and gratitude for both.

Stevenson’s switch in poetic style also heightens the impression of a space less than uniform. The poem consists of six parts each switching in typographical layout. The previous example features in part III where fifteen separate stanzas are divided into diamond slithers as if to emulate the image of the driving rain in Wales. Yet, these diamond slithers appear in direct contrast to other stanzas which are more robust; wedges of solid text in traditional brick-like shapes. Yet the separate stylistic devices do not denote either

¹⁷⁵ Anne Stevenson, ‘Green Mountain Black Mountain’, *Collected Poems 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 184.

one landscape or another; rather they detail a combination of the two places as well as intimate accounts of the speaker's painful memories of her dying mother. Furthermore, in another diamond shaped stanza in part IV the speaker intimates that crossing the inbetween space of the Atlantic is, 'That child-pure/impulse of away, retreating/to our God-forgetting present ...' (lines 145-7). Dazed by the sensation of living between two cultures and thus two consciousnesses we perceive how the speaker revels in the purity of being nowhere or in between somewhere. In another example of how places can be re-made, Stevenson suggests that the physical act of crossing the Atlantic offers a pure retreat where one's past can be momentarily left behind. The journey space, so often considered self-meditative, becomes a way of living vicariously without the ideologies or social codes that, according to Lefebvre, encumber one's perceptions of certain places.

The spiritual and cultural ideologies Stevenson tries to subvert within the body of her text are made evident throughout the poem. Stanzas that convey the opposing social codes and customs are echoed throughout the text each following much the same template that was discussed earlier:

In dread of the gilded Bible and the rod-cut hand,
gratitude for the green mountain.
In dread of the falling towers behind the blazing man,
gratitude for the black mountain. (lines 215-8)

Here we can see how religious symbols combined with images of the Welsh textile industry, 'the rod-cut hand', provides the speaker with gratitude for Vermont. By contrast, the final lines seem indicative of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and evoke the inherent fear of terrorism that is felt whilst on American soil. Interestingly, these dramatic

contrasts drawing upon symbols in the midst of two mountains have become less concerned with the geological make-up of separate landscapes and more of a cultural critique on a nation and a society. Stevenson's imaginative appropriations of place enhance the ways the two cultures can co-exist in a textual space together – how dread and gratitude are again inseparable as each place is at once enlivened and overshadowed by the presence of the other.

Yet, there is more to Stevenson's poem than re-imagining a geographic duality. She also vividly interweaves a narrative that evokes the intensity of the bond between a child and a mother figure. Mid-way through the poem, Stevenson inserts an extract from her mother's journal:

*It is a strange reaction but suddenly the war
has made it imperative to spend time at home
reading and being with my children (lines 95-7)*

The journal extract is preoccupied with being at home alongside the act of mothering, two concepts that seem to be significant to Stevenson and recur in other poems, particularly in Chapter Four. In a state of shifting consciousnesses and cultures, it is no wonder that the longing for a maternal figure (perhaps alluding to regrets about her relationship with her own mother) is an important theme. In her poem, Stevenson is able to reclaim all that is dearest, and perhaps lost to her, in the textual space of imaginative possibility as the following lines suggest:

The pen drew its meaning
through vacancy,
threading a history. (lines 98-100)

In many ways Stevenson has re-imagined a textual world where she can trace a personal history – a space where she can knit the loose threads of her own identity: in Kristevan fashion, somewhere it is possible to express all ‘the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex’.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, the simultaneous joys and hatreds of the mother/daughter relationship are worked through in this poem in a painful second narrative. We might consider how Stevenson’s poem links the maternal with the cultural in order to re-make a personal history that is often disturbed by the experience of expatriation and the trauma of losing a mother. Furthermore, the maternal leanings in this poem reinforce the female impetus which co-exists with, and occasionally overrides, the Anglo-American experience of cultural duality.

For British-born poet, Denise Levertov, the representational space of the poem becomes a way of forging a link between her childhood haunts in Essex with her status as an American citizen in the New World. In her poem, ‘A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England’ she traces her sincere love of England’s beautiful landscapes even though she acknowledges that she views them through the lens of an outsider. The poem begins with a rather prosaic explanation of her cultural heritage, her present home, and the map of her birth-place:

‘Something forgotten for twenty years: though my fathers
and mothers came from Cordova and Vitepsk and Caernarvon,
and though I am a citizen of the United States and less a
stranger here than anywhere else, perhaps,

¹⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’ in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore eds., *The Feminist Reader: Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 213.

I am Essex-born:¹⁷⁷

Through the imaginative impulse of the poem we perceive how Levertov is recalling something 'forgotten for twenty years'. She proceeds to chart her own cultural lineage as well as that of her parents. Further in the poem, she also refers to her subsequent transplantation to America. She speaks from the perspective of an American citizen; America, incidentally, being the place where she feels 'less a stranger than anywhere else'. However, she still conveys an intimate bond with her English birth-place as she details an intricate map of her childhood haunts. In an introduction to her poetry in *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985) she writes recalls similar picturesque memories of living in England as a young girl:

Romantic and beautiful Wanstead and Valentines parks, frequent expeditions into the Essex countryside with my sister, and my mother's very strong sense of history, developed in me a taste for seeking-out and exploring the vanishing traces of the village of Ilford which London had engulfed. The reading I did myself, and the reading aloud which was a staple of our family life, combined to give me a passion for England – for the nuances of country things, hedges and old churches and the names of wildflowers – even though part of me knew I was an outsider.¹⁷⁸

In her own words as well as through the speaker in her poem Levertov conveys the idea that one can connect deeply with the beauty of certain landscapes even if it is from the vantage point of an outsider. In fact, being an outsider is creatively enhancing in that Levertov crafts an imaginary world where her past, present and future co-exist harmoniously. This idea is subversive given that one would expect to read narratives of

¹⁷⁷ Denise Levertov, 'A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex in England', *The Jacob's Ladder* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1965), p. 19.

¹⁷⁸ Denise Levertov in the introduction to her poems in Jeni Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 76.

displacement in poems that speak from the perspective of the cultural outsider. However, again we see how the Anglo-American woman poet draws upon all her imaginative resources in order to appropriate new places, or, as Kristeva would have it, 'parallel worlds' and 'a-topias'. Moreover, within the body of her text, Levertov offers the possibility that place can evoke hidden desire, again echoing Kristeva's idea that literature becomes a site to explore the 'dreams' and 'secret joys' of 'the second sex'.¹⁷⁹ Here we see the sensual relationship between poet and place: 'Cranbrook Wash called me into its dark tunnel' (line 6). The intimate exchange between landscape and self can be fully expressed with the representational space of the text and illustrates the significance of Levertov's personal relationship with the natural world she loves. The exchange between self and landscape is highly charged and its intimacy enables the speaker to recall the poignant reminders of her own family's narrative. The church at Seven Kings evokes the knowledge that her birth and marriage are recorded there as well as her father's death. We begin to understand that this poem is more than a map of a county but also traces a genealogy of the Levertov family – a map that records and roots human existence. In the face of displacement, Levertov is keen to assert her sense of being in the world, much like Stevenson in the poem before.

Levertov sees her sense of difference as a privilege and explores her surroundings voraciously. However, she never diminishes the displacement of foreigners and intimates that being in a new land is like being lost without a map. Further into the poem, Levertov refers to a body of immigrants in America – 'the Ivans' and 'the Marias' – who are: 'picking up fragments of New World slowly,/not knowing how to put them together nor

¹⁷⁹ Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in Belsey and Moore eds., p. 213.

how to join/image with image,' (lines 32-34). Levertov likens this sense of being an outsider to the idea that all territories were once unknown and undiscovered: 'now I know how it was with you' she says, referring to England, 'an old map/made long before I was born shows ancient/rights of way where I walked when I was ten burning with desire.' (lines 33-35). Her reference to an 'old map' could be read as a metaphor for the Levertov legacy which was predetermined before she was born; she is, of course, also like the 'Ivans' and 'Marias' in that she too is still picking up fragments of the New World – this poem was published in *The Jacob's Ladder* (1965), written just seventeen years after her own expatriation from England to America. She has a profound awareness of what it means to be an outsider, yet also finds solace in weaving her transplanted family and its lineage into the actuality of text.¹⁸⁰ Within the body of the poem, all the joys and fears of living in and between two lands can be held together, can be reworked as a whole, as if into a personal history.

American Locations

The following selection of poems is centred on the poets' perceptions of New York.¹⁸¹ Other American places are frequently represented by the poets but New York seems to be a central artistic hub to which some of the poets are naturally drawn. Interestingly the poets here speak from two distinct vantage points – this might be as an expatriated American

¹⁸⁰ The distinction between the Old World and the New is a preoccupation of Levertov's which is reflected in other poems. 'Wind Song' looks at how the speaker sees herself as a fiery ember whirling between landscapes as she repetitively asks 'Who am I?' 'Ways of Conquest' is a similar poem embracing the shift between lands; both these poems are analysed later in Chapter Six where the self is seen in relation to landscape.

¹⁸¹ See also Mina Loy's 'America A Miracle' which illustrates the high regard she holds for America and the ability of its people to love all things new. Anne Stevenson, Anne Rouse and Eva Salzman also offer various other depictions of the American landscape which are not mentioned in this chapter. What this shows is the depth of their feeling for place and their attempt to console any sense of inner conflict with regards to their cultural duality and sense of being in the world.

returning home as well as a British-born migrant viewing New York through unaccustomed eyes. Even the American-born poet who returns home is seeing the city as a denaturalised citizen, therefore, echoing the plight of Eva Salzman who claims that to leave one's country renders one an outsider on all fronts. Salzman writes several poems on her perceptions of New York; her poem 'Brooklyn Bridge' (*One Two II: A Songbook*, 2002), is a beautifully crafted sonnet which is evocative of her childhood growing up in New York City. In the poem we perceive how Salzman's return to her homeland allows her to re-possess the place in which she grew up – she is acutely aware of all the subtle nuances that 'belonging' often makes transparent. When asked about the poem in an interview with Lidia Vianu, Salzman makes the following observation on her work: 'The traffic hum of the Brooklyn Bridge was the background score of my childhood, and I wrote a sonnet about it, in order to re-possess what I felt to be mine.'¹⁸² This notion of re-possession reflects what Lefebvre and Kristeva say with regards to the imaginative text being a space in which to embody and re-appropriate a physical terrain. Salzman immediately declares her sense of ownership in the opening line: 'This one's mine'¹⁸³ (line 1). She then proceeds to renounce all the clichéd imaginings that de-familiarise the very symbol that provides the backdrop to her childhood consciousness: it is 'not a nail-less Bridge of Sighs', she claims, or a 'stage' where 'film crews shoot'. To the speaker in this poem, Brooklyn Bridge represents something more ambiguous and personal. The following example portrays the allure of the darker aspects of the structure, she writes it is 'more hunkering church, grown from gothic grey/its cables spun from spiders bred in books./That dark harp was made for me to play.' (lines 5-7). The

¹⁸² 'Vianu and Salzman in Dialogue', ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network website, <http://www.icorn.org/articles.php?var=29#anchor61> [Accessed May 31 2007].

¹⁸³ Eva Salzman, 'Brooklyn Bridge', *One Two II: A Songbook* (Brough: Wrecking Ball Press, 2002), p. 51.

image of Brooklyn Bridge compels Salzman to literally re-possess it, to re-imagine it anew – the harp in need of playing is an elegant symbol which demonstrates Lefebvre's idea of appropriating space and injecting it with subjectivity. This appropriation also plays on the tie between mother and child: 'I was harnessed by a yoke of fear, from birth,/less myself while adding to that sum –' (lines 11-12). The awe in which the speaker views Brooklyn Bridge is testimony to its prominence as the backdrop to her childhood. She sees it as a mother-figure to which she is bound, as if by an umbilical cord. Her fear of being harnessed to an object she sees as having a maternal essence we envisage how Salzman is perhaps considering the intensity of the bond between herself and her motherland as she returns as a denaturalised New Yorker. Salzman is also clear to indicate that her personal transatlantic crossings have often left her feeling a range of conflicting emotions with regards to her sense of place in the world. She found herself pleased to be leaving New York for Britain in 1985, however in a recent interview with Lidia Vianu she reveals:

After all these years, I've fallen back in love with my hometown – even appreciating the New York arrogance which is a palliative to the stuffy Home Counties English stuff I was living with in Tunbridge Wells – the place I lived the first years I was in the UK.¹⁸⁴

As if to emulate the process of falling back in love, this poem might be read as a symbolic re-entry or re-birth into the cityscape Salzman left behind. The gendered aspects to this poem are again impossible to ignore – the special relationship between poet and place is re-imagined in the space of the text and often intersects with the longing for a metaphorical mother or motherland.

¹⁸⁴ Lidia Vianu, 'Interview with Eva Salzman' http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/eva_salzman.htm [Accessed on 02/09/05]

In another of her poems on the New York cityscape, Salzman attempts to unify two different perspectives. Her poem, 'There is Nothing to See' (*The English Earthquake*, 1992) takes as its subject a female tourist who views New York through mechanical binoculars and intersects it with the speaker's homecoming (this could easily be Salzman). The title of the poem 'There Is Nothing to See' slides us straight into the action by becoming the first line of the poem as well as dialogue uttered from the tourist as she glimpses the cityscape through the binoculars – disgruntled that the tourist could be so shallow the speaker proceeds to validate the first visual impact of the city's skyline with the following observations '...that Manhattan block more like/ an unanchored liner, brilliant and over-chandeliered.'¹⁸⁵ Each observation of New York is grand and beautiful even though we sense that the strange charm for New York is as much concerned with its mythical aura as it is with the tangible structures that make it a place:

I could hang on its vision of gold, gold
dust or silvery hail, emerald-city
myths or fairy tales. But it might collapse
with a thud, drop like a bomb – or in silence perhaps,
slowly, almost unnoticeably begin to descend,
slink back into dead waters, like the Titanic,
as it goes, no one believing in its end.¹⁸⁶

Clearly, this a poem of conflict – Salzman finds it hard to articulate an essence or central locus when referring to New York. As a tourist, the view from the binoculars is underwhelming, whereas as a denaturalised citizen it is grand and beautiful yet also ambiguously reveals the sense that the myth surrounding the city is more powerful than the

¹⁸⁵ Eva Salzman, 'There Is Nothing to See', *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 28.

¹⁸⁶ Salzman, 'There Is Nothing to See', pp. 28-29.

image. The speaker tells us that the inhabitants would crave its presence even if it were to sink in the sea. The representational space of the imagination according to Lefebvrian principles is all about expressing the various conflicts of a place which cannot be articulated in material existence. We see how the conflict is vocalised between the tourist and the denaturalised yet loyal inhabitant; we also witness the conflict between the actual physical structures of the city and the mythical presence of the city. In fact, the poem attempts to pull together an outer and inner reality and suggests that place and one's connection to it is as much determined by how one perceives and imagines it as it is about the place's physical urban blueprint.

If Salzman expresses a certain loyalty for her birthplace, then Stevenson's view of New York is one of scepticism. In a poem that features in one of her earliest collections, *Reversals* (1967) she addresses her predominant cause for concern which she sees as America's international policy on going to war with Vietnam.¹⁸⁷ In her poem 'New York' she intersperses subtle war symbols with the strange fascination of New York City and quietly and disconcertingly illustrates the dichotomy of living the American dream. Stevenson is not a native New Yorker like Salzman but she spent her adolescence growing up mostly in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She did, however, reside briefly in New York (amongst other places) in the late 1950s – a period of transformation for the poet as her first marriage to Robin Hitchcock was also collapsing. Not only this, but her visits to New York and other American cities and

¹⁸⁷ Levertov also writes prolifically on the Vietnam War and was an active anti-war demonstrator. Most of her Vietnam poems can be found in her *To Stay Alive* collection (1971). She sees the policies on going to war as being tied closely with the government and not necessarily tied to a specific nation or place within that nation. Levertov is largely aware that war is a human action and not one founded on location and one's cultural identity. Stevenson's poem is pertinent to this chapter in that she uses the New York vision as a way of conveying the very sense of foreboding that the war would have evoked in the people of that city.

states must have resounded with the haunting echoes of Vietnam. In response to these multiple sensations, 'New York' pulls together the various visions of the city depending on which perspective one takes. The speaker begins by describing the reaction to the city as 'This addiction!/ The ones who get drunk on it so easily!'¹⁸⁸ This resonates with Salzman's mythical vision of the same city, yet this craving becomes problematic when a spectrum of desperate sequences is presented:

The romantic, sad, hearted,
expensive inhabitants
who have to believe there is no way out,
who tear at themselves and each other
under the drumbeats while everyone
dances or weeps
or takes off clothes hopefully,
half sure that the quivering bedstead
can bring forth leaves,
that love, love, love
is the only green in the jungle.¹⁸⁹

Stevenson is openly pessimistic and the desperation of the sexual union is perturbing. Above all, the fact that these hopes, dreams and imaginings are realised before a backdrop of physical violence and bloodshed in Vietnam offers a heightened awareness of the hopelessness of living in New York with its 'expensive inhabitants'. Yet the evocation of war is implicit rather than strident – the words 'love, love, love' could be taken from *The Beatles'* 1967 song 'All You Need Is Love' which became a familiar anti-war sentiment in the 60s. Stevenson would undoubtedly have had the words swimming around in her head even though she was living in Glasgow when the song was released and possibly when she was contemplating the writing of this poem. Interestingly, *The Beatles* is also an English

¹⁸⁸ Anne Stevenson, 'New York', *Reversals* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p. 43.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

cultural reference and illuminates the intersection of British and American symbols which might validate Stevenson's attempt to heal the divide which crossing the Atlantic opens. America, and New York in particular, becomes contentious; revealing desire for a strange, masochistic kind of love as its citizens tear themselves to pieces, trying to conceal guilty secrets that allude to war and bloodshed in 'the jungle'. In later years Stevenson admits that her attitude towards America was at times acrimonious. In fact it was the writing of her later poetry collection *Correspondences* that became a way of healing the conflict she felt as a native of an America she felt betrayed by: 'Without resorting to confessional poetry, I managed to exorcise some of the guilt I felt with regard to ... my confused, poisoned feelings about America itself.'¹⁹⁰ Stevenson's New York poem most certainly illustrates her earlier 'poisoned feelings about America'; nonetheless, it is a poignant record of her views of New York as a visitor, a native American and a new resident in England. The representational space of the poem successfully knits together a vision of New York as one which is temporarily flawed but in which life carries on, albeit uncomfortably. Without doubt, cities are conflicted environments, yet poets can, within the imaginative realm of the text, repossess a place which requires the dominant ideologies (such as those of innocence and charm) to be inflected with the unspoken reminders of war.

Written around the same time as Stevenson's poem, Levertov's poem 'February Evening in New York' (*With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, 1960) is also concerned with repossessing place but does so with a heightened spatial awareness. She perceives New York as a physical area with streets and borders which interconnect with an essence or

¹⁹⁰ Stevenson, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*, p. 187.

spirituality of the people who live within its structures. Levertov's poem is suggestive of Lefebvrian thought that sees a link between the way space is experienced, perceived and imagined.¹⁹¹ Although the poem itself is the imagined spatial element or the 'representational space', within the boundaries of the text Levertov's poem identifies how the city is also an area that is experienced through certain activities such as work and shopping: 'The stores close...' and 'The buildings close ...'¹⁹² Meanwhile, the poem also shows how the cityscape is shaped as streets and buildings divide the city from the natural landscape: 'Prospect of sky/ wedged into avenues ...' (lines 20-21). Levertov's poem can be read as a physical topography of the way a city is shaped in relation to its uses. Yet amidst these physical descriptions of a city's space we also witness a spirit or imagination of the people that populate it. Interestingly, Levertov illuminates this imagination through snatches of dialogue: '*You know, I'm telling you, what I love best/ is life. I love life!*' (lines 13-14). American optimism and vitality is interlaced with the physicality of the city, yet strangely, bodies do not exist in this scene:

... released autonomous
feet pattern the streets
in hurry and stroll; balloon heads
drift and dive above them; the bodies
aren't really there.

(lines 5-9)

The disembodiment conveyed here is slightly perturbing and seems strange in a poem that so firmly locates us within the physicality of place. Levertov repossesses place in her own characteristic way of fusing the tangible world she clearly loves with the sense of an

¹⁹¹ The 'experienced-perceived-imagined' triad was outlined in more detail in Chapter One and is taken from Andrew Thacker's reading of Lefebvre in *Moving Through Modernity*.

¹⁹² Denise Levertov, 'February Evening in New York' in *Collected Earlier Poems 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 101.

‘elsewhere’, the sense, that is, of bodies being simultaneously present and absent. In this way, the poem becomes a ‘representational space’, a space of alternative possibility, in which the ‘here and now’ is left behind by bodies that are not really there.

English Locations

Seven out of the nine poets in this study spent their formative years in America before moving to Britain, so it is hardly surprising that visions of England feature far more prominently in this chapter. H.D., Riding, Plath, Fainlight, Stevenson, Rouse and Salzman all moved from America to England and the following selection of poetry illustrates how a few of them respond to their new surroundings. More specifically, the notion of pastoral England is frequently caricatured by some of these poets and their poetry often dismantles idealist perceptions of middle-class rural life. Mostly, the anti-pastoral poems by American-born poets affords them a mouthpiece from which to both undercut and re-possess a literary heritage that dates back most notably to the classical poets, Theocritus and Virgil, as well as to the English Renaissance poets, Edmund Spenser and Sir Phillip Sidney.

Without doubt the poets’ presentations of English places are somewhat contentious. Not only do certain geographical locations evoke strong feelings but some of the poets (Fainlight, Rouse and Salzman, in particular) also seem to thrash out the idea of what Englishness and English identity mean in the twentieth century. Even British-born poets often seem uncomfortable when aligning themselves with the remote and old-fashioned values of respectable English society that were prevalent pre-1945. Contemporary poet Rouse also subverts the genteelness of English stereotypes by offering a striking

observation of the English football scene in 'England Nil' (*Sunset Grill*, 1993). Her speaker, an English football hooligan, tells of the foiled plan to cause trouble at a match with Germany. The end of the poem issues a warning to the reader: 'You've been Englished but you won't forget it, never.'¹⁹³ Despite the resounding sense of contempt, Rouse assures her readers that, 'Rather than being a specific cultural critique, "England Nil" reflects a fascination with misdirected energies and excess.' Furthermore, she stresses her allegiance to her adopted country by claiming that: 'Generally those early satires were written from the point of view of a participant in, and lover of, the culture.'¹⁹⁴ Positive representations of England are comforting within a twentieth-century context which has witnessed the questioning of British ideologies and the condemnation of colonialism and imperialism. Even for those who are more patriotic, the twentieth century also saw the eventual decline of the British Empire overseas and the realisation that it was no longer the dominant international force it once was. Rouse's observations as an expatriate living in England warrant space because she is a 'participant' and 'lover' of England and English culture rather than a sceptic as we might naturally expect. By offering sharp observations on the British landscape and the people that inhabit it, we see in the following selection of writing that the poet is able to soothe the experience of living as a new resident in a culture and place deeply riddled with old-fashioned English values.

Visions of England are expressed in some interesting detail by American-born poets Ruth Fainlight, Anne Rouse and Eva Salzman. Most often they are responding to the very

¹⁹³ Anne Rouse, 'England Nil', *Sunset Grill* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p. 27.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Anne Rouse conducted by Melanie Petch in February 2006.

distinct experience of living in rural England. Moreover, all the poems have a satirical edge; the satirist is, according to Matthew Hodgart, someone who:

...does not paint an objective picture of the evils he describes, since pure realism would be too oppressive. Instead he usually offers us a travesty of the situation, which at once directs our attention to actuality and permits an escape from it.¹⁹⁵

Hodgart's definition of the satirist is unforgiving and negative. In the following poems, however, satire is not so much used as an escape from a situation but a sense that the poet is trying to *understand* it. In spatial terms the poem is a way of commenting on a specific place and its community, not to mock it, but to say I can comprehend this place and the people in it even though I am not a native. As we have witnessed and will see further, the poem can pull together ideas about different places and affords the poet the chance to repossess a place as her own means of identifying with something seen as other. Furthermore, satire sees the poem inflected with all the subtle and not so subtle nuances of a place, its customs and its community.¹⁹⁶ Salzman is clearly adept at handling satire as she uses it further in another of her poems, 'Ending up in Kent' (*The English Earthquake*, 1992). This poem is obviously concerned with repositioning the self within the Kent landscape; witness how the speaker begins by demanding: 'Postcard-picture me in a country of thatch'¹⁹⁷ (line 3). It is as if Salzman is writing home to America – a 'country of thatch' having all the idealised associations of England that an American audience would

¹⁹⁵ Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: World University Library, 1969), p. 12.

¹⁹⁶ Salzman writes an interesting poem on English mannerisms called 'The English Earthquake' from *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992). I decided not to include it here as it is less focussed upon a specific place. Anne Rouse's poem 'Cat Fancy' also talks about the stereotypical perceptions of Englishness; this can be found in her *Sunset Grill* ((Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), pp. 23-24.

¹⁹⁷ Eva Salzman, 'Ending up in Kent', *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 12.

appreciate. Implicitly, she is inserting her American self into stereotypical English rural life – joining her split cultural selves and re-possessing a place where both can co-exist. However, to further enhance her explorer status in a new land, Salzman proceeds to intersect these idealised scenes of rural life with the close observations of one more than merely visiting: ‘I walk detergent streams, in search of trees./ Someone’s put me in a story-book, but kills/ every tree before my entrance’ (lines 10-11), ‘I follow an ordinance survey map and find/ frightening rows of straight and vacant pines’ (lines 12-13), ‘In warm weather/ they sell sulphur from the wells for your pleasure’ (lines 26-27) and ‘What leaves are left on what trees are left will turn’ (lines 28-29). Spatially, this poem is interesting – the England she has come to know and love via the stories and pictures she has seen of it back home in America has created a mythical or ‘story-book’ impression in her mind. She perceives England as a space conceived as rolling hills, chocolate-box cottages and trickling streams. The reality – or the way the place is imagined or re-appropriated in the poem – is quite different. The toxic imagery makes it hard to read Salzman’s poem as a positive representation of Kent, yet what it does do is suggest the way the expatriate can become one with the landscape in which she finds herself in. Kent is repossessed by Salzman in a such a way that a native could not – she is aware of the contractions between how she perceived Kent from afar and how she re-imagines it after her physical exploration.

Anne Stevenson’s visions of England are similar to those of Salzman’s. In particular, her poem ‘In Middle England’ illuminates the prevalence of English ‘props’ used to conceal something more sinister. Her poem speaks from the perspective of an ‘UnEnglish tourist’

and describes the sense of disbelief at some of the strange and unnecessary English customs. It is only on the tourist's departure for another European destination that the speaker asks:

Will he ever think gently

Of the ladies
Planted in pairs in
Identical houses? Of the
Jars of lilac-colored soap?

Of the mournful
Decanters full of perfume or
Disinfectant? Of the roses,
The desolate neatness? The controlled despair?¹⁹⁸

Visually, her poem is neat, echoing the strains of tidiness that she refers to in the content of the poem. Yet her final line is elongated as if the words themselves cannot be contained within tight stanzas any longer. Another Anglo-American, Sylvia Plath, also betrays similar sentiments to those revealed in Stevenson's poem; these she vented in an interview with Peter Orr in 1962:

I must say that I am not very genteel and I feel that gentility has a stranglehold: the neatness, the wonderful tidiness, which is so evident everywhere in England is perhaps more dangerous than it would appear on the surface.¹⁹⁹

Stevenson's poem comes from her second collection, *Reversals*, published in 1969, just after she had travelled America extensively and finally located herself in England – temporarily in Cambridge and then Glasgow. Her own snatches of biography suggest

¹⁹⁸ Anne Stevenson, 'In Middle England', *Poems 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 49, lines 33-40.

¹⁹⁹ 'A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr' from *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery*. (London: Routledge, 1966). <http://stinfwww.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/beckmann/plath/orrinterview.html> [Accessed 12/09/05].

conflicting emotions with regard to both her native and her adopted lands. It was around this time that she recalls feeling ‘...lost, footless, countryless, unable to feel my way into or out of the academic society ...’²⁰⁰ At a time in which she was clearly disillusioned with her own sense of cultural identity in many aspects, it is understandable that Stevenson should write of England with some cynicism. Her sense of rootlessness in England seems to be propelled by her feeling that she was unaccepted as an academic, wife and mother. Another of her poems, ‘England: For Peter Lucas’, also traces themes of conflict in terms of her attachment to place: ‘No one leaves England enamored,/ But England remembered invites an equivocal regret’²⁰¹ Indeed these few poems by Salzman and Stevenson offer a way of providing an outlet for this conflict – the poem, certainly in Stevenson’s case, is a way of showing how England is both perceived with contempt and affection depending upon one’s Atlantic positioning. The poem partially heals some of the pain that English ideologies and deep-rooted customs inflict upon the poet. The mythical elements of a place are also paramount to the writing of the poem – in fact layers of imagination permeate the poems here. In Lefebvrian terms they illustrate how a place is imagined from afar, how it is actually lived in, and how it is reappropriated in such a way that harmonises the sense of difference. Stevenson superbly unites both America and England in a satisfactory resolution as her speaker concludes: ‘Americans like England to live in her cameo,/ A dignified profile attached to a past’ (lines 20-21).

²⁰⁰ Anne Stevenson in the introduction to her poetry in Jeni Couzyn (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 186.

²⁰¹ Anne Stevenson, ‘England (For Peter Lucas, 1966)’, *Reversals* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p. 37, lines 6-7. Peter Lucas is Anne Stevenson’s fourth husband, however, this poem was written before they married in 1987.

English and Jewish Inflections

The pastoral ideals of rural England are complex issues to express within the poetic text, as we have seen, yet, for all the poets the textual space is often a way of validating the self. When visions of England are inflected with Jewish currencies as well, the poem becomes an even more complex space of cultural energies. Like Salzman, the thatched cottage as the epitome of English identity is a significant theme for Ruth Fainlight too. She also makes use of this pivotal symbol and intersects it with Jewishness in her poem, 'The English Country Cottage.' (*Burning Wire*, 2002). Significantly, this poem is from one of her most recent collections which indicates that after sixty years of living in Britain she is still digesting, to some extent, the cross-currencies which complicate her sense of self. In this poem Fainlight offers her reader a summary of her family's cultural heritage; she explains how her father's family were Jews who descended from Poland whilst her mother, who was also Jewish, came from Bukovina. After a while spent in Ellis Island, just south of Manhattan, Fainlight conveys how her family came to England to build a new life. The following excerpt illustrates Fainlight's personal entrance into a world of excitement further enhanced by her Jewish heritage:

I ran straight into the fire's centre,
towards the focus of trouble, glamour, danger;
danced, like Esmerelda, on the Round Table
as desperately as if to save my life.
Such were my tactics in those distant times.
Now (though mimicking the locals dutifully),
Thatch and cruck-beams cannot camouflage
the alien. The carillon rings mockery.

Sometimes I wonder if I should have known better:
to sweetly smile and eat the mess
of pottage – but never sell my birthright
for an English country cottage.²⁰²

(lines 34-45)

It is as if the passing of time and the self-reflective state that ageing promotes has enabled Fainlight to speak out about the ways she feels she has betrayed her Jewish roots. She notes how ‘thatch and cruck-beams cannot camouflage/ the alien.’ We sense that many years have been spent attempting to deny and conceal her strangeness. The English country cottage, along with thatch and cruck-beams juxtaposed with the mention of her birthright suggests that cultural identity is largely seen as either/or – it cannot be both Jewish and English. In a recent interview Fainlight openly admits that she ‘certainly [doesn’t] blend seamlessly into the landscape here. And [that she has] never felt so much a foreigner as when [she] lived in an English village.’²⁰³ Yet, this poem has resonances of Levertov’s poem ‘A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex’ where she traces her family heritage in an attempt to unite a culturally split self. Here Fainlight is also admitting that she is not quite at home in her rural landscape, yet by writing the poem and by drawing attention to these very personal conflicts that lie within, we can see that she can unite past and present – she can validate her strangeness to an English audience and assuage her guilt for betraying her Jewish heritage. Although we sense that Englishness comes at a price, Fainlight has not entirely sacrificed the essence of her identity, one’s birthright. The poem is a tangible record of how she has re-possessed her adopted home and how, painfully at times, she has managed to insert her complex cultural identity within it.

²⁰² Ruth Fainlight, ‘The English Country Cottage’, *Burning Wire* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), pp. 32-33.

²⁰³ Interview with Ruth Fainlight conducted by Melanie Petch in April 2004. See appendix.

Even British-born poet, Mina Loy, has deep reservations about the notion of Englishness. She was writing many years earlier than Stevenson, Rouse and Salzman, yet still she conveys sentiments that illuminate her personal distaste for English customs. Her lengthy visits to the cosmopolitan cities of Paris, Munich and Vallombrosa in Italy incite the following observation in her poem 'Italian Pictures': 'We English make a tepid blot' which she perceives in sharp contrast to the vibrancy of the Italian climate and the animated people that inhabit it.²⁰⁴ Loy was captivated by the artistic milieu in Europe and, eventually, the bohemian areas within New York City where she lived intermittently between the years 1916 and 1953. Once Loy had experienced a taste for the adventurous life that was available to her outside England she was able to perceive her homeland as a place of conflict, both culturally, and more interestingly, maternally. Her own personal disillusionment with England is also due to her unhappy childhood growing up in London. These reservations are partially due to her parents' mixed heritage – her mother, Julia Lowy, was English and her father, Sigmund Lowy, was an Hungarian Jew – and partly due to the stifling Evangelical upbringing she had in Victorian England which threatened to censor her vivid and artistic imagination. Loy's biographer, Carolyn Burke, charts the overpowering influence that Julia Lowy's religious beliefs had on Loy as a little child: 'As she grew, Mina began to think of Julia not so much as an armoured tower but, rather, as "the Voice," the overwhelming force that invaded her thoughts.'²⁰⁵ In her lengthy automythology, 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose', Loy retells the

²⁰⁴ Mina Loy, 'Italian Pictures', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997) p. 10.

²⁰⁵ Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 26.

union of her parents (renamed Exodus and Ada in the poem) and notes the tensions between both her mother and father, as well as the cultural differences between the two. Always with a sense of inferiority, Loy's father is portrayed as seeing Julia as 'Albion/ in female form'.²⁰⁶ However, aligning herself with her father as an Anglo-Mongrel, Loy empathises with his position of cultural difference:

Exodus has nothing but his pockets
to impress
his rabid rose of the hedges
while for her redress
she can flaunt the whole of England in his foreign face'²⁰⁷

Clearly, Loy's satirical tone reveals her disgust with her mother for lauding her Englishness as if it were a prize to be valued. Not only that, but Loy's alignment with her father as a cultural outsider sets the precedent for much of her artistic oeuvre as she has always managed to evade a literary mainstream. Loy's cynicism is hard to identify as being either directly caused by her mother's introspection, or her disillusion with England as she ingested alternative views, or both. However, it becomes clear that her subsequent voyage to America in 1916 offered her the freedom to fulfil her creative ambitions. Burke notes that 'New York soon acquired other meanings for her: as a vortex of energy, an urban parade, an artistic and intellectual community, and a refuge for those who, for diverse reasons, were the outcasts of Europe.'²⁰⁸ It is worth bearing in mind that Loy had been an American resident for seven years by the time she wrote 'Anglo-Mongrels' and characteristically she embraces experimental poetics by fracturing her use of poetic form and interlacing it with the bluntness

²⁰⁶ Mina Loy, 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose', *The Last Lunar Baedeker* ed. Roger L. Conover (Highlands: The Jargon Society, 1982), p. 123.

²⁰⁷ Loy, 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose', p. 145.

²⁰⁸ Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*, p. 212.

of an American idiom. She had also experienced first-hand the multi-cultural climate of bohemian Greenwich Village and was inspired by its cultural multiplicity. In what is one of her most significant pieces of critical work, 'Modern Poetry', she discusses what she considers to be the vital components of the American language:

This composite language is a very living language, it grows as you speak. For the true American appears to be ashamed to say anything in the way it has been said before. Every moment he ingeniously coins new words for old ideas, to keep good humour warm. And on the baser avenues of Manhattan every voice swings to the triple rhythm of its race, its citizenship and its personality.²⁰⁹

Clearly Loy was intensely aware that the liberal stance of the American people was more in tune with her own way of thinking – this new way of living was an escape from a society that would have ensured the repression of her artistic creativity. Indeed, she betrays her adopted American spirit in a poem entitled, 'America * A Miracle', in which she lauds: 'you are a flash of lightening,/ a stroke of genius.'²¹⁰ Referring back to 'Anglo-Mongrels', however, Loy's poem as a 'representational space' is a cathartic way of verbalising painful childhood memories. The pain of her father's exile and her ability to textually align herself with him in the space of the text enables Loy to soothe away some of the misgivings she felt about her mother and living in England.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that these poems often express mixed ideas about expatriating between America and Britain and seem to offer a palpable sense of 'otherness', it is evident that the

²⁰⁹ Mina Loy, 'Modern Poetry', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 159.

²¹⁰ Mina Loy, 'America * A Miracle', *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (Highlands, The Jargon Society, 1982), p. 227, lines 5-6.

poem as a 'representational space' offers the writer an opportunity to present displacement as a largely positive and dynamic event. A number of the poems have shown that when disorientation does occur as a consequence of moving in and between America and England, the essential elements of the two nations are amalgamated and the experience of 'otherness' is soothed. Some of the poems bring together and explore imaginatively two places that cannot be joined in material conditions. We witnessed how Stevenson's poem 'Green Mountain Black Mountain' is typical in unifying two significant places that formed the backdrop to her own childhood and showed how she was able to tease out her 'dread' and 'gratitude' for both. At other times, we perceived how the poets' sense of identity was consolidated in the space of the poem as they offered a fretwork of personal heritage. Levertov was concerned with tracing her own personal history in 'A Map of the Western Part of the County of Essex.' Mountains, earth, parks and streams as well as the ephemeral qualities of wind and dust all seek to carve a vivid picture of a young girl's cultural legacy and affirm her adult sense of self as she articulates her existence through poetry. Maternal imagery and symbols were another frequent concern for the poets in this chapter, which seems to imply the very organic and natural connections they feel to both their motherland and their adopted homes. The articulation of Jewish identity was just another inflection in this patchwork which was able to be explored within the space of the poem. Speaking retrospectively, Fainlight touchingly conveyed her sense of disloyalty at having masked her Jewish origins in an attempt to seem English. Again, while not offering a solution, the poem becomes a space in which taboo thoughts can be expressed and released. Loy's highly personal automythology was just another way we witnessed the articulation of national identity and personal family history. Again, Jewish identity was a defining motive

with the poem enabling Loy to position herself as an outsider with her father and allowing her to condemn her mother and her motherland's anti-semitism. Above all, the one overriding preoccupation of this chapter is its surprisingly subjective nature. We might conclude that this chapter is not so much about the way the poet sees the world but more about the way the poet sees herself in relation to the world. The poem allows her to imagine feminised ways of living and moving between locations and affords her a sense of liberation, if not peace, in the world she inhabits.

Chapter Four

Home and the Domestic Sphere

In the previous chapter we considered how Anglo-American women poets re-possess place through the creative writing process. Place, as we witnessed, was significant because of the poet's perspective as a cultural outsider; it became a physical arena which could be re-appropriated through the imaginative process of producing poetry and enabled the poets to harmonise their disorientating experience of cultural duality. Interiorising this idea of harmonisation – or the consolidation of ideas perhaps – within poetry, this chapter is centred upon the home which I will define as a physical space of containment with boundaries and walls which separate it from the wider location in which it is positioned. One might expect to find Anglo-American women poets as cultural outsiders, re-imagining the home as a space where they feel closeted and protected from the sense of otherness which becomes conspicuous once they cross the threshold from an essentially private space to a highly visible physical space or reality (like the outer reality embodied in places, for example). However, the longstanding and self-perpetuating symbols of home that denote both female subordination as well as, at times, freedom reveal how the home becomes a site of conflict for women poets. The art of writing poems, therefore, becomes a vital task that enables the poet, driven by gender first and foremost, to heal the hurt, as well as to celebrate the joys, that the home invokes. Where antagonisms exist, the poem empowers these women poets and allows them to explore their anxiety but from a position of control

and authority. Alternatively, in poems where the home is thought of fondly, often as a memory, the text, again, becomes the canvas upon which past and present can blend.

Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle draw upon the post-war poetry of Anne Stevenson to define the paradox of the home as both 'chrysalis' and 'impediment'; referring specifically to Stevenson's poem, 'The Price' (*Enough of Green*, 1977) they note how her phrasing 'signals ... the ambivalence with which she and others view its circumscribing but curiously generative influence.'²¹¹ Interestingly, this selection of poetry overwhelmingly highlights the conflict felt by twentieth-century poets when occupying the home. It would certainly be true to say that for these poets, at least, the home is more impediment than it is chrysalis. However, they are particularly adept at using their craft to ease the tensions that permeate the home space. Rather than seeing Stevenson's notions of the home in binary terms we might imagine how they interconnect – the text itself becomes the chrysalis which, in turn, frames the impediment. To revisit the ideas of Lefebvre, especially relevant in this chapter, we begin to understand the power of 'representational spaces' and the potential they have in allowing poets to thrash out all the unspoken conflict that would not be possible in a physical reality. As outlined in Chapter One, Lefebvre claims that representational spaces embody 'complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art.'²¹² Furthermore, the representational space or poem is superimposed upon physical space and is exciting for

²¹¹ Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 125.

²¹² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 33,

the very reason that it need 'obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness.'²¹³ Women poets are aware of the literal meaning of home as defined by patriarchal ideologies (domestic, female, other, inferior, peripheral, subordinate), yet given that representational spaces are not governed by rules, the home is re-appropriated in new and liberating ways – conflicts are verbalised and an alternative home or a 'parallel society', as Kristeva calls it, are realised.²¹⁴

The twentieth century has seen to varying degrees the home both 'in' and 'out' of both British and American consciousnesses ('out' during the war period when women were expected to find roles outside the home to sustain national economies, particularly in Britain; and 'in' when the post war period saw the revival of the domestic role and the rise of consumerism). Whether patriarchal narratives perceive women as best positioned in or out of the home at any given period in history, it is clear that the poetry presented in this chapter outlines the home as a site of antagonism as well as comfort throughout the twentieth century; in fact, these contrasting views are still present in poetry that was produced right up until the cusp of the twenty-first century. This seems unbelievable in an age in which we are told that male and female roles have been equalised to a certain extent and that we are now supposedly living in a post-feminist age.

The range of poetry produced by Anglo-American poets that concerns themes of homes, houses and domestic ideals is vast and this chapter's selection of poetry is small in comparison. What defines this grouping, however, is the way the text or representational

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in Belsey and Moore eds., p. 207.

space presents positive ways of dealing with the contrasts that manifest within the four walls of home. Although each of the poetic voices is distinct, what emerges is a cacophony of empowerment, resolution and at times, stridence. Conventional gender roles are exposed for their unsuitability with wit and confidence; at other times, the home space is reclaimed and re-defined with the female in control of her own domain. Male prejudices of what the home should be are discarded with a confident shrug of contempt. Kristeva, always sceptical of existing systems which define a given society, claims that it is possible to create a 'counter-society' which 'remains the only refuge for fulfilment since it is precisely an a-topia, a place outside the law.'²¹⁵ Even though the home clearly does not always offer fulfilment, we envisage how this range of poetry exposes the inadequacy of existing narratives of the home as defined and enforced by men and even some women. Significantly, the poetry does not follow a chronological pattern; rather, the poetry falls broadly into four general sub-sections. This means that contemporary poets are read alongside the post-war poets who are, in turn, also aligned with the modernists. What I am implying here is that there is no historical logic to this chapter – the poetry cannot be read as a linear narrative of the home. There is no fixed starting point and there is no ending – the home continues to throw up an array of issues that can only be harmonised within the creative space of the text.

Like all the other chapters in the thesis, it is impossible to chart this poetry historically. The narrative of the home cannot be ordered neatly – there are few developments even though certain periods of feminist activity are often mirrored in the writing of the same time span.

²¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi (ed.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 202

Here, I think of Loy and the advent of the feminist movement in Britain. More distinguishable, however, are the themes that recur in the poets' works. The first area to be discussed is the concept of gender wars; we witness how gender becomes the driving force behind this chapter and also how the preconception of home as a space for the subordination of woman is contested. When men do appear in the domestic arena it is always expressed in antagonistic terms. In fact, even in the light of the intermittent and inconsistent feminist strategies throughout the century, the battle between the sexes has remained a potent source of discontent. If any developmental observation were to be made, it might suggest how the contemporary poets evoke a slightly more muted, world-weary response which contrasts to Mina Loy's highly strident and satirical observations earlier in the century. The second area focuses on the way memories of previous homes are re-imagined in the text alongside the present. This section is very much concerned with the passing of time and the capabilities of the creative process – the poem can literally weld two periods in time together and the experience of living in and between two homes may be actualised. We see how representational spaces can unite past and present and allow the poet to resolve them side by side. A third sub-section looks at the significance of thresholds – the bridge between domestic space and the social space outside. Anne Rouse offers a superb example of a threshold in her poem 'The Passage' – the very literal passage between two houses becomes a creative arena where her speaker considers the prospect of an alternative world symbolised by a chink of turquoise sea. Kristeva's female 'a-topias' are fully realised in this section which sees the poet finding some sort of homely solace in spaces on the periphery of physical homes. This selection of poetry culminates with several sinister poems by contemporary poet Eva Salzman who likens the prospect of returning

home after a night out as a kind of 'suicide'. In fact, we might consider Salzman's poems as domicidal – literally murdering the idea of home as we have come to understand it. It must be said that all the poets – even Laura Riding who claimed she never wanted her work positioned in an exclusively female context – are preoccupied with the home. Again, the selection process for this chapter has had to be ruthless in its selection.

Gender Wars: Conflict and Empowerment in the Home

The following selection of poetry largely accentuates how men and women coincide antagonistically within the home. It is still seen as being a predominantly female domain, yet Loy in particular addresses the idea that within this realm women are attempting to verbalise the lack of equilibrium between themselves and men. Loy utilises satire to cleverly turn male arguments back onto them. Her energetic poem 'The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni' illustrates her immensely passionate and outspoken voice. In this poem she directly challenges the idea that women co-exist harmoniously with their husbands by presenting a narrative of a supposedly 'complete' marriage. Interestingly, one of her contemporaries, Ezra Pound, although a champion of her work, thought it necessary to change the title to, 'The *Ineffectual* Marriage' [my italics], when he excerpted her work in several anthologies; in doing this, he seems to overlook the obvious satire which underpins Loy's biting critique of marriage and domestic relations.²¹⁶ Modern scholars of women's writing have acknowledged Loy's confidence in revealing:

²¹⁶ Roger Conover makes a brief reference to Ezra Pound's amendments in his notes on 'The Effectual Marriage' in Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1997), p. 185.

a preoccupation with the female point of view in relation to the major institutions of heterosexuality, romantic love, sex, marriage and economics. [Her] perspective is always a critical one.²¹⁷

Indeed, Loy's speaker conveys the point of view of the 'seemingly' contented, yet submissive housewife, Gina. In spatial terms the house has distinct spheres which are clearly demarcated by gender. The speaker firmly allocates Gina a female space 'among the pots and pans' in the kitchen.²¹⁸ The following example shows how Gina is consumed with the idea of her time spent submerged within her woman's role and in her female space:

Gina was a woman
Who wanted everything
To be everything in woman
Everything every way at once
Diurnally variegated
Mioivanni always knew her
She was Gina²¹⁹

Characteristically, Loy combines a candid idiom and complex lexis with an innovative use of poetic form. Her forthright approach subverts the very literal narrative she conveys of Gina being trapped within time, space and gender – we perceive Gina's impossible aspiration is to be 'everything' in woman. She is 'diurnally variegated' – cyclical and changeable, yet 'Mioivanni always knew her'. She is predictable and seemingly transparent - nothing more or less than woman. Of course, Loy's satire is most distinct here, for she is clearly aware that patriarchy has, in fact, been creating and defining woman for centuries. So, of course, Mioivanni would always know her – she is, after all, one of his greatest creations. Within Loy's representational spaces, as defined by Lefebvre, her sardonic approach to women's place within the home is clearly empowering – she professes to align

²¹⁷ Mary Galvin, *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.53.

²¹⁸ Mina Loy, 'The Effectual Marriage', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 36.

²¹⁹ Mina Loy, 'The Effectual Marriage', p. 38.

herself with patriarchal ideologies, yet, her satirical voice suggests an altogether different guise as she simultaneously exposes its flaws. Loy's motives for inhabiting text are driven by her need for empowerment and linguistic authority which she wholly achieves in this poem.

Furthermore, Loy goes as far as to suggest that the Miovanni's male domain of the library as a space of enlightenment and self-knowledge is inconsequential. Loy's speaker conveys Gina's fears that she will be overcome by something that is far beyond her understanding:

While Miovanni thought alone in the dark
Gina supposed that peeping she might see
A round light shining where his mind was
She never opened the door
Fearing that this might blind her
Or even
That she should see Nothing at all²²⁰

We are told that for Gina, the library is out of bounds because she fears that Miovanni's knowledge might blind her or even worse that she will see nothing at all – or put another way, that she won't understand, and thus forever find him impenetrable. Even though this is what we are told by Loy's speaker, female readers understand, being complicit in her satirical outlook, that Miovanni's space has been exposed for the very fact that nothing much goes on behind the door at all. By re-appropriating the binaries that exist between male and female spheres, Loy manages to diminish male status and create a textual space where her females have the last laugh.

²²⁰ Loy, 'The Effectual Marriage', p. 38.

The typographical terrain of Loy's poetry is also a significant factor to consider when arguing that the poem is a space where concepts like the home can be re-imagined and ideologies subverted. Loy explicitly draws attention to the technical composition of her poem and in many ways her radical discourse subverts traditional notions of what it means to write as a woman. In this poem and also in her 'Feminist Manifesto', Loy's innovative impulse is first and foremost driven by gender. Her abandonment of conventional punctuation, particularly the full stop, seems to signify the importance of silence, particularly the silence that is often enforced upon women. In her essay, 'Poetry and Grammar', Loy's great friend and mentor, Gertrude Stein, suggests that:

when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and if writing should go on what had colons and semi-colons to do with it, what had commas to do with it.²²¹

Loy, like Stein, prefers to write poetry that is not determined or restricted by punctuation. It seems that commas and full stops signify silence – something women have been bravely trying to overcome for generations. When the full stop is used it thus becomes significant and in need of analysis. Stein and Loy both seem to firmly assert the female voice by allowing it freedom of expression and refusing to acknowledge punctuation that seeks to stifle expression. In 'The Effectual Marriage,' the full stop features twice as a poignant reminder of what female silence actually signifies. Both are situated at the end of the narrative. The first occurs after a description of Gina's attempt to write 'a poem on the milk bill'²²². Inevitably, this is her downfall – unforgivably, she has spoken without Miovanni's

²²¹ Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar' is quoted in David Lodge's essay, 'The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy', Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.487.

²²² Loy, 'The Effectual Marriage', p 39.

permission. Loy offers a critique of patriarchy and its attempt to keep women subservient and above all, quiet. The second full stop occurs as the poem finishes:

(This narrative halted when I learned that the
house which inspired it was the home of a mad
woman.

- Forte dei Marmi)²²³

The speaker becomes apparently uninterested in Gina's story after she realizes that she is a 'mad woman'. The moment Gina ventures out of her domestic space with the pots and the pans into the supposedly male realm of knowledge, light and intelligence, she becomes assigned the status of insanity. It is Loy's satirical voice and linguistic capability which cleverly re-position women as being in control over their destinies by showing how they can expose the ludicrous nature of patriarchal beliefs.

Another of Loy's poems, 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots', incites the same feelings of the house as being safe and female on the one hand, yet oppressive on the other. In the poem the house becomes a space in which virginal women without marriage dowries are kept until a suitor comes along to bargain for them: 'Houses hold virgins/The door's on the chain'.²²⁴ The house becomes ambiguous for these women who are only capable of staring into the outside world without the freedom to participate in it:

See the men pass
Their hats are not ours
We take a walk
They are going somewhere
And they may look everywhere
Men eyes look into things

²²³ Loy, 'The Effectual Marriage', p. 39.

²²⁴ Mina Loy, 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 21.

Our eyes look out²²⁵

Inside the home becomes a female space where women are only able to perceive the world outside through their windows. The speaker makes it clear that men are unlikely to be indoors as 'they are going somewhere', yet they are able to 'look into things'; they have the right to cross the threshold of the house and take what they desire – they can penetrate the very heart of the home. Deploying a radical break with conventional poetic form, it is through Loy's significant spaces in the text that she allows herself and other women ambiguity. It becomes a space that is indecipherable to patriarchy – perhaps achieving the desirable female space that Kristeva theorises. Loy's radical manipulation of form and syntax, although a modernist preoccupation, becomes an inventive way of hailing the arrival of a female authorial voice. Kathleen Fraser's study, *translating the unspeakable: poetry and the innovative necessity*, retells the process of the innovative writer as she comes into being:

One begins to understand that the established forms one is born into – the well-designed structures that precede, protect and guide – may limit and even harm the ability to listen for an interior prompt of difference and to follow its peculiar, often "irrational" moves ... having been called beside the point. Each writer comes up against this constructed wall and accepts the power, safety, and authority of its limits ... or decides to break through.'²²⁶

Fraser's criticism becomes a useful supplement to understanding Loy's motives and for reading the spaces inbetween the text in her poetry. Historically, it also illuminates the climate in which she found herself including the modernist principles that clamoured for artists to make it new as well as the feminist voices that sought to articulate the imbalance

²²⁵ Loy, 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots', p. 21.

²²⁶ Kathleen Fraser, *translating the unspeakable: poetry and the innovative necessity* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 202.

of power between men and women. Increasingly with Loy, it becomes hard not to read her innovative tendencies as a break from patriarchal rules (indeed, even the modernist ones) and as a desire to reclaim language as a female space in which to manoeuvre. Loy was able to mould dialogue in order to create a space in which she could discuss the themes which impassioned her as a woman. In fact, the intersection of the domestic space with radical form immediately distinguishes Loy's work from a body of modernist work by men that was innovative yet anti-sentimental. Suzanne Clark argues that:

The modernist innovation depended upon a rewriting of woman's image that that resisted the sentimental and troubled women writers. This was a rewriting that women writers have struggle both for and against, desiring freedom and authority as serious members of the avant-garde but also needing the traditions of emotional identity they have been pressed to abandon.²²⁷

Loy manages to achieve both; her work conveys the domestic anxieties that exist between men and women alongside the rupture of syntax and shattering of form. In fact, it is quite apparent that her poetry is far more innovative than Anglo-American poets writing later in the twentieth century, particularly those who are American-born and prefer to adopt a more orthodox approach to poetic form and idiom.

In a similar vein, Ruth Fainlight writes an important poem called, 'Domestical' (*Sibyls*, 1980) which conveys similar sentiments to Loy. Fainlight wrote the poem in the late seventies (fifty years or so later than Loy) within a climate that had seen female empowerment regress to a certain extent. Certainly in Britain, literary women were only just achieving critical recognition but it was sparse, and to combine it with a domestic role

²²⁷ Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 13.

that was obsessively cultivated still seemed impossible. According to Claire Buck, women's post-war poetry was hardly recognised claiming it was not until 1980 that the first women-centred anthology appeared in Britain in the form of Lilian Mohin's *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969-1979*.²²⁸ However, the domestic challenges that weighed heavily upon women's shoulders were prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic. Alicia Ostriker also charts the regression of women's role in American society, yet it is clear that these domestic values in the fifties and sixties would have undoubtedly permeated British culture too. Ostriker notes that:

In the late 1950s and early 1960s every woman's magazine in the country preached the joy of wifehood and the creativity of domesticity for women, much as a century before every woman's magazine had preached the sacredness of woman's separate sphere and the beauty of female selflessness. A smaller proportion of college students and professional people were women in 1959 than in 1929.²²⁹

The pressures of domesticity within the home were clearly oppressive and it is within this milieu that Fainlight conveys explicitly the themes that Loy conceals underneath layers of satire. The following example follows six stanzas that explain her speaker's pious response to domestic duties and the potentially unsettling situation this conceals. Note how the lyrical voice invokes vivid feelings of displacement and even a diminishing sense of female self:

Because I will not admit what I think, I have
no opinions; never admit what I want,
have forgotten my needs; never admit who I am,
have lost my name and freedom

²²⁸ Claire Buck, 'Poetry and the Women's Movement in Postwar Britain' in James Acheson and Romana Huk eds., *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 81.

²²⁹ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (London: 1986), p. 58.

until this huge discomfort constitutes
my whole existence – called to act a part
for which I'm completely unsuitable.²³⁰

As with all poems of this nature it is hard not to read this autobiographically; Fainlight also admits that like Sylvia Plath, 'I too, am a product of that enormously oppressive 1950s perfect wife, perfect housekeeper, perfect everything.'²³¹ Furthermore, she explains perfectly the dichotomy of the home and its relationship with the outer world: 'It seems to me that the outside being alarming and threatening and so therefore the home is a safe place, on the one hand. On the other hand, the home is the place that consumes you and negates you.'²³² For Fainlight, the loss of self is profound and threatening, [I] 'have lost my name and freedom'. Yet, what is the alternative for these women writing in such an oppressive climate? The outer world, or symbolic order, as defined by Kristeva, is also a hostile environment, as Fainlight registers.

Anne Stevenson has always remained loyal to traditional structures of poetry and even goes as far as to show scepticism for poets who favour free verse. In response to a statement on her use of traditional meters made by Cynthia Payne for *The Cortland Review*, Stevenson recently noted:

Well, I suspect there isn't really such a thing as free verse. Or if there is, I don't think I've written any. Readers may not always realize how formally

²³⁰ Ruth Fainlight, 'Domestical', *Sibyls and Others* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 74-75.

²³¹ Interview with Ruth Fainlight conducted by Melanie Petch [April 2004]

²³² Ibid.

constructed my poems are—but I assure you, not a single line has ever been passed over as accidental or unconsidered.²³³

She implies that free verse is somehow less perfected than her own formal expressions and betrays a deep scepticism of the free-verse poets that drew inspiration from the fracturing of form that was prevalent in the modernist period. In fact, opinions like Stevenson's are, according to Keith Tuma, the very kind that pretend modernism 'never happened in English poetry.'²³⁴ Despite these contentions over form, Stevenson's poem, 'The Women', has explicit echoes of Loy's poetry that speaks of the separate spheres which men and women inhabit within the home and the domestic sphere. Her poem begins, 'Women, waiting for their husbands,/ sit among dahlias all the afternoons'.²³⁵ Several small details in these lines have rather a large impact upon this poem. Firstly, we see that this is not a poem about a specific woman, rather, it is about the collective term women. And secondly, this is not a poem about any particular afternoon, but *all* afternoons. It speaks for the generic experience of womanhood within a specific society. We comprehend the importance of Stevenson's stresses on the repetitive and uniform nature of female negotiations within the house. Like Loy's poem 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots' we see how very little appears to happen within Stevenson's domestic space, 'The room is a murmuring shell of nothing at all'. The

²³³ Anne Stevenson in an interview conducted by Cynthia Payne for The Cortland Review, November 2000, Issue 14. www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm [Accessed 12/09/05].

²³⁴ Keith Tuma (ed.) in his preface to the *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xxii. Tuma sets up a compelling rationale for his selection of poetry that challenges 'anti-modernist' attitudes in Britain. His anthology includes works by Mina Loy, John Rodker, Basil Bunting, Denise Riley, Tom Raworth and Maggie O'Sullivan to name but a few, who all draw upon a modernist tradition of poetry. Even though he forewarns of criticism for his 'Americanizing' of a British and Irish formation of poetry he claims that this a vital task if British and Irish poetry is to continue to be read and valued in American academic institutions. Another motive is to call into question the current literary traditions in Britain that seek to eliminate modernist influences altogether by continuously supporting the 'Movement' and its progeny.'

²³⁵ Anne Stevenson, 'The Women', *Travelling Behind Glass: Selected Poems 1963-1973* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1.

space becomes a mysterious hive of nothingness – life seems to stop within the house and only reawakens when the men return from ‘...the deep, from the mystery’. We perceive how the female space and the experiences that take place within it become impossible to verbalise, possibly because of the fear that it will be undermined and dismissed as irrelevant, or perhaps it is Stevenson’s ploy for female anonymity – why should she convey the significance of women’s daytime experiences only to have their significance shattered. Kristeva’s concept of the ‘chora’ as a return to a pre-symbolic state is alluring for the speaker in this poem, who prefers to convey the home as a space of imagination not articulation. For Stevenson and Loy it is best to present it as satire and illuminate its ‘nothingness’ (as patriarchy would have us believe) as if to resist a solid definition which is then open to attack. This place exists solely outside discourse, and while this remains an unknowable space, it can simultaneously become a space of power and anonymity for women as it is a space of confinement.

Stevenson explores the tensions between men and women further in her poem, ‘Night Thoughts and False Confessions’. We perceive again how the home becomes a metaphor for the female imagination. The poem falls into two parts, the first stanza encompassing male thought processes and the second stanza encompassing female imaginings. Both stanzas express the impossibility of negotiating this space together. The male speaker laments:

How uneasily I live
in the house of imagination.
True beams drive cleanly, rising,
sliding from hissing traffic, only to

slip or miss on your chancy ceiling.²³⁶

The 'house of imagination' is indeed the female mind or psyche and is frustratingly intangible and 'chancy' to the male subject. The direct beams of male presence are unable to find ways of interacting with the unknowable elements of the female psyche. It is this femaleness that disconcerts him as he says: 'I can feel you being human and woman' as if the two things are separate and in conflict with one another. And further, 'On the slopes of the absolute/ absolutely nothing would happen.' In Stevenson's poem we sense male frustration at being unable to connect with the female psyche. The female subject in Stevenson's poem, however, interprets his direct actions differently – they are to her, brutal, as if a 'thrush cracks the house of the snail'. The male mind too, becomes impenetrable because of its monolithic tenements: 'You beat me and beat me / on the slab of your mind's concrete.'²³⁷ The conflict created between these two psychic spaces is uncompromising – the male and female unable to negotiate the same spheres. The female is soft, sensuous, emotional – doing everything she thinks will keep the male content yet inadvertently pushing him further away: 'I was sweetness in your kitchen', she cries 'obedience in your word-stall, / I was softness overflowing in your garden / scented deep at nightfall.' Her sweetness and softness are dangerous to man because it is an alien experience to him – he cannot find a port of entry. She is undeniably unfathomable and elusive. Stevenson's metaphorical use of the house in this poem addresses the same issues as Loy: men and women, rotating on separate axes, never fully able to inhabit the same spaces in complete harmony.

²³⁶ Anne Stevenson, 'Night Thoughts and False Confessions', *The Collected Poems of Anne Stevenson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 136.

²³⁷ Ibid.

For contemporary poet, Anne Rouse, the observation of gender roles in her poem, 'Fairyland', has chilling undertones. Even though approximately eighty years separates Loy's work from Rouse's we still witness the same debates raging about men and women who attempt to inhabit the same environment. 'Fairyland' seems to absorb a century of female pain and disappointment and narrates a horrifying tale in which three young girls pay a festive visit to a specially constructed 'FAIRYLAND' inside a local supermarket:

We handed up our quarters to the barker
for FAIRYLAND,

a caravan in mauve and lilac;
and wandered through
a doll-sized kitchenette
to a living-room in beige, immaculately scaled.

Someone had worked hard on it.
Maybe the little man in his undershirt,
who slumped and stared at the Japanese portable.
His midget wife was ironing with a toy.

She scowled, looking down; her eyebrows meshed.²³⁸

Instead of snow-drenched fir-trees, sleighs and an endearing Father Christmas we see that the girls have been confronted with the stark reality of everyday female drudgery. It becomes even more absurd in that it has been scaled in miniature and the ironing is done with a toy; significantly the toy (a socially constructed tool) exemplifies the apparent innocence in which young girls are moulded into their gender roles. Like the concept of fairyland, the toy also illuminates the illusory nature of society and the way in which things are prettied and trivialised in order to make them appear more innocent. By contrast, we see

²³⁸ Anne Rouse, 'Fairyland', *Timing* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997), p. 41.

how the wife's scowl and meshed eyebrows become a permanent signifier of disillusioned adulthood, or more specifically, womanhood. The girls have stared womanhood in the face and they are frightened of the concept that has been sold to them as a magical, fairy-like world. The little girls are confronted with a scenario they did not at first fully realise. What is clear as they stumble into the night is that their innocence has been crudely snatched away from them:

We were only three gaping small girls,
Who stumbled together, in a hurry,
And set out cold across the night's

unblessed and thorny wood, where now,
real wolves seemed to howl, and witches
worked an unfathomable spite.
Our footprints merged in the snow.²³⁹

The journey into the night after their shared experience becomes the point at which the terrifying nightmare is fully acknowledged. The final line is chilling as the speaker conveys how the girls' 'footprints merged in the snow' – they become one woman, indistinct from each other and all ultimately sharing the same nightmare, yet enforcing, perhaps, a sense of female solidarity. Like Anne Stevenson before her, who also portrays the fairytale/nightmare experience in one of her poems, 'Fairy Tale', Rouse succeeds in questioning gender roles and the concept of home within an imaginary dreamscape.²⁴⁰ By utilising an alternative realism Rouse is able to fully examine female roles without using the lyrical 'I'. Marina Warner has written extensively about the significance of fairytales in

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Anne Stevenson also expresses an alternative realism in her poem, 'Fairy Tale', in *Travelling Behind Glass: Selected Poems 1963-1973* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Like Rouse, she also illustrates the disharmony within the house particularly in relation to gender. Yet, her use of a fairy tale vision (significantly, dreamt by children) ultimately enables men and women to inhabit separate areas of the house. Again, the socialisation of gender roles is also apparent in Stevenson's poem as in Rouse's.

women's writing and defines it typically as being: 'the story of something in the remote past to look towards the future, their conclusions, their "happy endings" do not always bring about closure, but make promises, prophecies.'²⁴¹ The only promise or prophecy that Rouse's poem reveals is a forewarning of a continued subordinate female role in society. We can see how inhabiting the domestic space is just as debilitating in the twenty-first century as it was for Loy eighty years earlier.

Furthermore, in another of her most recent poems that was published on the cusp of the twenty-first century in her 2004 collection *The School of Night*, Rouse attempts to articulate domestic tensions with another displacing technique, the dream. In an attempt to redress the balance of female vulnerability within the home her speaker conveys a scenario where she imagines 'She diminished the man. / ...She dreamed she lost him / on the stair.'²⁴² The fact that her speaker dreams this sequence of events accentuates how her voice becomes less personal, confessional; yet it is still undeniably female. The following example highlights the ways in which her personal items become enormous obstacles for him to overcome within the confinement of the house:

Each step would have loomed
Like Annapurna.

Elated, at the top,
he'd have to face
the soft rucks and furls
of her clothes, strewn,
islanded in the hall.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and their Tellers* (London:Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. xvi.

²⁴² Anne Rouse, 'The Steps', *The School of Night* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 41.

²⁴³ Rouse, 'The Steps', *The School of Night*, p. 41.

The house, although generally considered a female space becomes a dangerous habitat for a man diminished in stature and size. We notice him battling against the most harmless and insignificant of household objects: dust, crumpled clothes, a crack in the floorboards. However, his ultimate quest, we are told, is to 'slay his fear / of that original woman.' Significantly, the woman becomes that *original* woman – Eve perhaps, the evil first lady who succumbed to the ultimate temptation that led to her betrayal of man. The speaker asks:

Most of all, could he forgive
a final craning vision
of her, as monster,
monolith – before entering,
restored, as man?²⁴⁴

Rouse's poem seems to contrast greatly with the earlier twentieth-century poets, particularly Loy. The very daring use of 'I' has dissipated and has been replaced with dream-sequences and imaginary settings, people and scenarios. However, 'The Steps' does explore themes that were also being expressed by the modernists – the speaker in the poem implies that if the female is audacious enough to diminish man in such a way then she must be labelled 'monster'. Still, we sense it is unacceptable for women to do anything other than what Virginia Woolf suggested in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929 – that is, to mirror man at twice his natural size.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Rouse, 'The Steps', p. 41.

²⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 44.

Imagining Homes Outside Houses

Some of the poetry presented by Anglo-American women poets in the twentieth century exemplifies the significance of thresholds, spaces of inbetween and margins. The following chapter on journeys discusses these inbetween spaces in detail. Some of the discussion can be anticipated by considering the home and domestic space as being neither entirely within the physical boundaries of the house nor in the midst of the outside world. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, in their study *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (1990) illustrate the significance of breaking free from boundaries:

An implicit recognition of the power of discursive formations to constrain and restrict is expressed in metaphors of enclosure; a sense of the self as existing beyond those constraints is expressed in metaphors of fluidity and freedom of boundaries.²⁴⁶

Indeed, the notion of threshold implies a sense of striding away from the boundaries that seek to constrain. Significantly with regards to the house, occupying the threshold becomes a cultural space from which to question female roles within society. Horner and Zlosnik claim that: 'The notion of a border giving physical presence to a state of marginality is recurrent in women's writing.'²⁴⁷ And although a presence of marginality is synonymous with all women's writing it is worth considering that inhabiting the border lines of thresholds the woman writer finds herself in a creatively energising space that knows no artistic limitations. Resonant of Kristeva's theory which finds the creative search for a female space as empowering and liberating, even the margins are fertile places for artistic

²⁴⁶ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 13.

²⁴⁷ Horner and Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire*, p. 8.

production. Taking a broader perspective, one can also witness how the transatlantic positioning of these women makes them especially adept at oscillating in and between two places. As such, the shift between centre and margin, in and out, is just another practice that these poets find energising and one which is exemplified in the following selection of poems.

A recent poem by Rouse in *The School of Night* explores the idea of thresholds and inbetween spaces superbly. 'The Passage' explores the literal 'passage between houses' and ties domestic metaphors with the exciting possibilities of a threshold inbetween the domestic realm and the outside world. The poem needs to be seen in its entirety to fully appreciate its rich imagery, the multiple layers of meaning and the poem's gradual development:

In the passage between houses,
a rucksack gaped in the dirt, revealing
a milkpan, a toy kettle,
and a greenish, flat bottle of olive oil.

When I came up that narrow way again,
the rucksack had gone.
The cooking things lay absurd, under a wisteria.
I took the olive oil home.

The next time I climbed there,
the kettle had been kicked down
all 25 steps, and the milk pan
resembled a bopeep sunhat.

But today the passage undulates free
between the old-rose bricks,
the dark August leaves parting
for turrets, and captain's walks,

and a sliver of turquoise,

on which an immaculate sail
rides motionless, a small white yacht
whose invisible hull

winks, diamond, down the coast,
and what could it be signalling?
Never distress, the sea is too serene.
It must be the sun, its last late beam,

exiled, hailing, *goodbye*.²⁴⁸

First and foremost the passage between the two houses is neither inside nor outside the home space. Likewise, it is neither inside nor outside the world at large. Rather, we see this threshold scattered with remnants of domestic items – things that seem quite literally out of place once outside the home: ‘The cooking things lay absurd, under a wisteria.’ John Kerrigan states that ‘you may be paradoxically less yourself in a room which mimics domestic space than in a room which doesn’t, but it is also that, in such a state of alienation, the proportions of the familiar are felt by their absence.’²⁴⁹ The absurdity and displacement of these items become a fixation for the speaker for whom return visits sees the items further removed from their initial resting place and in greater states of deformity; the olive oil is taken by the speaker, the kettle is kicked down the steps and the milk pan is misshapen (significantly, it resembles a bopeep hat belonging to a nursery rhyme character looking for her lost sheep). The sense of abandonment, loss and displacement infiltrates this poem with immense clarity. Certainly, in the first three stanzas of the poem, Rouse’s sentences are sharper, more controlled, conveying a sense of finality, as if there can be nowhere further for the poem to explore: ‘the rucksack was *gone*’, ‘I took the olive oil

²⁴⁸ Anne Rouse, ‘The Passage’, *The School of Night* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 57.

²⁴⁹ John Kerrigan, ‘Notes from the Home Front: Contemporary British Poetry’, *Essays in Criticism*, 54:2 (2004), p. 111.

home', 'the kettle had been kicked *down*' [my italics]. And then, unexpectedly, the final stanzas become lucid, the sentences deploy a stream-of-consciousness style and we are offered symbols of freedom, of enchantment and serenity: 'the passage undulates free', 'the dark August leaves parting / for turrets, and captains' walks', 'an immaculate sail / rides motionless' and, enigmatically, 'the sea is too serene'. The vast expanse of sea becomes alluring for the speaker in the poem, perhaps for the very reason that it is constant, tranquil and serene. This serenity contrasts with the chaos of the threshold space where discarded domestic items litter the environment, and where the very identity of the place is ambiguous, being neither here nor there. Symbols of domesticity cross and collide with visions of possibility, all perceived from this passage of inbetween. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik identify two poles of thought relating to this type of space and its significance to women writers. The first is built upon Woolf's notion that every woman should have a space to write – a room of one's own – however, they suggest that this room or space is often used negatively or at least ambiguously by woman writers as it appears to express constraint rather than freedom.²⁵⁰ However, the second pole of thought suggests that although women do feel constrained within the home and want to express this they also have a strong desire to write about space:

we have a sense of space, envisaged in wide sweeps of land and unchartered tracts of sea ... not just to give a sense of place but to suggest, sometimes with ambivalence, the possibilities for self that lie beyond society, outside patriarchy, and within the future.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 7.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

If we consider these thoughts in relation to Rouse's poem, 'The Passage', it is possible to conclude that whilst in this space – the threshold of domesticity – the speaker is perturbed only by the lost and displaced items. However, the 'sliver of turquoise' sea (seen only when the domestic items have disappeared) suggests hope and endless possibilities. For as we have seen previously, Rouse's domestic metaphors illustrate how shared spaces are inhabited uncomfortably by men and women. The sea and the fantastic visions and dreams 'The Passage' evokes become specifically gendered, specifically female, and go a small way to redressing the balance of the disproportionate amount of space men consume in every other stretch of life.

For Anne Stevenson, the act of crossing the threshold is a less explicit account than Rouse's. One of her early poems, 'In the House', from her *Reversals* collection, exemplifies the ambiguous and suspect nature of inhabiting the space we call home. Rather than a literal space of inbetween, we perceive how Stevenson highlights the conflict of the female psyche as she simultaneously contrasts her grounded familiarity within the home with a sense of alienation. This extract exemplifies the strange feeling that the speaker's house has a hold on her:

Whatever it is, it's clear it has claims on me.
Its surface establishes itself
outside and around me,
drawing me through or into
what I take to be my proper dominion.

These keys are my keys, this door my door.
The interior is entirely familiar.

At the same time, nowhere is my choice
evident as a force for arrangement.

What meaning has this long white chain
of machinery, even as teeth,
extended, or painted, to the point of its disappearance?

...

Again, these interminable stairs, bristling with children.
“Mother, mother,” they wail. They bleat with desire.
They quarrel and hold up their wounds to be kissed.
And yet when I bend to them
It is like kissing a photograph.²⁵²

We see how the structures of the house become a metaphor for the shifting female psyche. Although familiar, its surfaces have consumed the speaker – established themselves around her and lure her inside: ‘drawing me through or into’. The poem seems to betray Stevenson’s own nervousness of inhabiting a house as a new mother and wife. The image of the keys, the door, the door chain, even her bleating children, all invoke a picture of entrapment. When her *Reversals* collection was published, Stevenson had already given birth to three children who were all still very young. She was also newly married for the second time to Mark Elvin and would have been coping with the very real hurdle of combining motherhood with a career as a poet.²⁵³ It was also at around this time that she was ‘distancing herself from the confessional and the poetry of ‘identity’.²⁵⁴ Despite these contradictions, however, it is impossible not to read this poem as an expression of her anxiety at negotiating a space where she hardly seems able to discern the real from the unreal; even her children are like images in a photograph. Whilst inhabiting the house, she is neither located in the very actuality of the present moment nor distanced within a psychic

²⁵² Anne Stevenson, ‘In the House’, *Reversals* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p. 15.

²⁵³ Peter Lucas, ‘Anne Stevenson: A Biographical Outline’ in *The Way You Say The World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson*, compiled by John Lucas and Matt Simpson (Beeston, Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2003), p. 3.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

or imaginary space that might have been more positive for her. Instead, she experiences a sense of strangeness at her familiar surroundings, the age-old feeling that she's not really there. Kristeva might consider this to be a case of a repressed identity due to a failure of recognition at the vital moment:

often in the social code, in social communication, the basis for our identities which the semiotic forms in language is repressed, thrown into confusion, and the fact of not hearing it, of not giving it room ... exposes us to depression, to a feeling of strangeness.²⁵⁵

The confusion for Stevenson's speaker in her poem is in the knowledge that her familiar home does not feel like her own even though patriarchal law claims that home is her true domain. She is unable to identify with the symbols that invoke what it means to live as a wife and mother in the domestic space. Her logical construction of discourse suggests that she knows what the symbols are – the keys, the door chain, her children – but she is ultimately unable to see them as a vital part of her female self. Even though Stevenson is unable to resolve her inner conflict within the space of the poem, just being able to verbalise the problem is a form of empowerment. Kristeva's idea that women are able to divulge taboo themes within their own creative space is a useful way of theorising Stevenson's poem. She has articulated the unspeakable, shameful feeling of disconnection from one's home and more importantly one's children. Representational spaces can therefore, become useful receptors for channelling raw emotion and thus subverting patriarchal expectations of the feminine ideal.

²⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity – an Interview', from Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p. 131.

Homes and Memory

In this section I shall illustrate the ways in which memories and evocations of the house are represented by Anglo-American women poets. Significantly, however, Lefebvre's poetic 'representational spaces' enable the writer to re-imagine memories. The poems that follow detail the positive elements of the home and tend not to express so much of a preoccupation with a sense of female otherness. Levertov, above all the poets, expresses her memories and evocations of the home enchantingly and as such, her work dominates this sub-section except for one poem by Anne Stevenson. The following poem by Levertov entitled, 'Room', captures beautifully the torture of leaving a much loved space and the haunting recollections of it:

Afternoon, an ample easy quiet.
But it breaks
sharply: the Davids
have moved, all the objects
stand at new angles, a kitchen I've never seen,
light from another compass point.
This room, my refuge, is nowhere but in my mind,
more blurred for them than for me, their memories
too many to sift and focus. 'Bees of the invisible,'
take this nectar, transform it, internalize it! If I lose
the knowledge of this place,
my soul shall be diminished. There is a song in all
humankind, that rooms, houses, parks, streets, fields
and particular corners of fields, rivers and certain
eye-span reaches of rivers, are notes in, as people are.²⁵⁶

Here we can see how Levertov's shattering of form at the juncture between the two homes – old and new – illustrates the wrench of leaving a home that has become part of the very soul. The word 'breaks' is accompanied by a literal break in the text. In a typically

²⁵⁶ Denise Levertov, 'Room', *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp. 102-103.

innovative American style, the streak of white space between the lines portrays the empty void left as the speaker departs; a space that has not yet been filled with the warmth and comfort of a memory. We might even consider that it becomes a space of grief. It is only on arriving at the new abode that the speaker, when experiencing a profound sense of displacement, feels able to recollect the memories of her old home. The actual space of the present becomes inadequate as the speaker longs to take refuge in the mind. Like so many of the other poets in this chapter we see how Levertov deploys another distancing technique as the house space is visualised only within memories of the mind – this being neither here nor there. We perceive how her knowledge of the past is likened to ‘nectar’ – the very food that she needs to survive. Yet, Levertov does not insist wholly on idealising her previous home; the following example illustrates the often painful ways in the kitchen space is negotiated as her speaker claims it was:

...a place to *be* in, not pretending
no tears were shed in it, no hard words ever shouted,
no gray mornings caught in the small mirror over the sink –
but seeing despite that, precisely because of that,
(grief not being turned away, a place
made for grief to be) one could
be there, and breathe easy, uncrowded.²⁵⁷

Vitally, we see that Levertov’s speaker is holding onto the essence of her very self as she remembers her much-loved kitchen. We see how family pain and torment which naturally inhabits these family spaces only enriches its charm. Levertov does not seem to fear or resist the home in the ways that some of the other women poets do. Her positive memories further accentuate the paradox of the home; according to poets like Stevenson, Rouse and

²⁵⁷ Levertov, ‘Room’, *The Freeing of the Dust*, p. 103.

Salzman the home is a crushing space where the self is displaced, yet for Levertov, the home, when it is familiar and lived-in, becomes the very core of being.

What is also apparent in Levertov's poetry is that the human soul often becomes metaphorically embedded within the tenements of the home. No poem illustrates this better than her poem 'A Letter to Marek about a Photograph: *for Mark Pawlak*':

This carpentered, unpainted, aging house,
one of many alike in some white ghetto,
is filled to the uninsulated seams with a face:
the brooding face of anxiety. – Or the house
(one can not say which is
superimposed on the other) is so montaged
waking and sleeping, into that mind, it is
the house that fills the outgazing head,
extends its boundaries with wooden angles.²⁵⁸

As the title suggests, this poem conveys the evocation of looking at a photograph. The poetic representation of a visual image is becoming a growing area of interest to academic scholars, who use the term 'ekphrasis' to describe this mode of poetry. The example above illustrates how the words, 'superimposed', 'montaged', 'boundaries' and 'angles' evoke the spatial distortions of an abstract painting and illustrate the contentions between interpreting what is visualised literally and imaginatively. We see how it is impossible to perceive whether it is the face that consumes the house or the house that consumes the face. The two have become welded together – they are each other - both blending together and exaggerated to grotesque proportions. The house is no longer a space to inhabit or to negotiate as a separate entity, rather, it becomes indistinguishable from the very self. The poem was written for American critic and poet, Mark Pawlak (Levertov uses the Jewish

²⁵⁸ Levertov, 'A Letter to Marek about a Photograph', *The Freeing of the Dust*, p. 100.

name, Marek in the poem) and illustrates the speaker's respect for his gift in absorbing the history of a house, and expressing the pain and humanity of it within his poetry:

You would have known its
familiar mystery, its faint, sour charm,
even by dark, even before you had seen
its fretted gable, Marek:
your in-feeling comprehension
would touch with probing finger
the concealed wounds of those who built,
those who dwelt, those who moved on
or died here. Your gift is to reveal
poetry in the cries caught in nameless throats ...²⁵⁹

The personified home has, in effect, become the poet's muse – his object of interest, of desire. In Lefebvrian terms the 'representational space' of the poem affords Levertov the chance to show the way a perceptive human soul interlaces with the legacies and histories locked within the home. Levertov beautifully suggests that the skilful task of conveying the history of a house is ultimately about uncovering 'the fever that it is to be human.'

Finding a Home in 'Other'

Anne Stevenson's poem 'The Other House' also builds upon the creative potential of memory but does so in a more disconcerting fashion than Levertov. Her memories of a childhood home evoke hostility rather than tranquillity and are distinctly less subtle than Levertov's. The poem tells of the speaker's (possibly Stevenson's) personal battle with the concept of home throughout her life from her formative childhood years through to adulthood. Stevenson's representation of the house is not a tangible structure in the same way as Levertov's; rather, the house becomes a metaphor for the female psyche itself. Each stanza represents a phase in her life and expresses the feelings that being trapped within the

²⁵⁹ Levertov, 'A Letter to Marek about a Photograph', pp. 100-101.

confines of the home evoke. Even in childhood, the speaker has memories of the home as *being a prison*:

In the house of growing up
I lined my prison wall
With lives I worshipped as I read.
If I chose one, I chose all,
Such paper clothes I coveted
and ached to try on.²⁶⁰

There is a sense that the home is not big or exciting enough for the young child who reads voraciously. The paper literary world that she refers to fills her with more excitement than can be experienced within the 'house of growing up'. Already we sense that resentment is building. The frustration mounts which is illustrated also in the rhyme scheme. Each stanza follows the pattern of lines a and c loosely rhyming, and the much longer line e tagged on as if to illustrate the tension breaking free from the poem's restrictive regularity. The awkwardness of the final line deadens the beat of the poem and loads it with the seriousness that the rhyme attempts to conceal. Yet, crucially these lines offer moments of epiphany where the speaker is able to fully comprehend the meaning of past experiences. In the seventh stanza, Stevenson introduces us to the 'strange house' to which she drove her mind – this house is ultimately 'other'. This metaphorical home might have been 'secured' and consolidated when Stevenson chose the creative path of poet. The home of 'other' in this sense might mean a home in text, in a poem. Stanza eight exemplifies completely the sense that inhabiting the threshold or the space between is the only place one can truly call home:

Beneath me, infinitely deep,
Solidity dissolves.
Above me, infinitely wide,

²⁶⁰ Anne Stevenson, 'The Other House', *The Collected Poems of Anne Stevenson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 126, lines

Galactic winter sprawls.
That house of the utterly outside,
became my home.

Both as a woman, and a woman poet, and also as an Anglo-American we might consider why the 'house of the utterly outside' is such a liberating place to reside for a poet like Anne Stevenson. She conveys the image of unlimited space, of no boundaries or restrictions or indeed censorship. Although it is cold and vast, it is her one true home where she can freely be herself. Within the space of the text, Stevenson is able to weave representations of the home as it is in material conditions with the home as she values it in her imagination. The poem has opened up a space where she can freely express her cynicism and rejection of the home as a domestic symbol.

For Rouse, the tenements of the home symbolise the deconstruction of late twentieth-century family life in her poem, 'Christmas Break'. Her speaker illustrates a journey from London to the family home for Christmas. Subverting our expectations of this usually joyous time, her imagery frames a sinister and deathly picture:

We've floored it from London.
The bridge winches up; the moat bares
To green algae silk, kitchen relics,
The bones of suicides.²⁶¹

The domestic symbols are a reminder of past lives and are likened to the 'bones of suicides'. Rouse invokes the notion that the home becomes a place where the very self is lost. Other lines in the poem also carve resonances of menace: 'The town's dead as midnight' and 'The wind skims the roof/ Like a bruising hand'. However, once the couple

²⁶¹ Anne Rouse, 'Christmas Break', *Sunset Grill* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 30.

step inside the domestic space it is the dining table that cements the meaning of the poem – drawing and closing the family together on one hand and yet on the other, metaphorically killing them too:

From now, a dining-table
Accommodates six at Scrabble
And a week's career beneath
The fairy lights: a family circuit
Closing like a wreath.²⁶²

The dining table becomes the central object that welds the family group, yet, the image of the wreath suggests that the family is unbearably suffocating. Rouse makes disconcerting observations on domestic symbols which enable her to subvert their associations, Rouse challenges existing perceptions of the modern family in the twentieth century and its identity within the home.

For modernist poet, Laura (Riding) Jackson, the notion of home also exudes a chilling sense of death in her poem 'The Life of the Dead': 'Resting among the tree-tops like a cardboard cottage,/ Stands their deathly dwelling – an absurd household it is!'²⁶³ Strangely, the home of Amulette and Unidor is as comical and absurd as much it is sinister and deathly. In fact, this entire section of the poem, sub-titled 'Dead Birth', embraces paradox (even the title); on the one hand, the home is a haven from the outside world: 'Their modest covert is safe from outer jangle', yet on the other, we are made aware of Amulette's chilling perception that the house is not an entirely safe space to inhabit either. The following

²⁶² Rouse, 'Christmas Break', p. 30.

²⁶³ Laura (Riding) Jackson, 'Dead Birth' in the lengthy poem *Life of the Dead* in *The Poems of Laura Riding* ((Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p. 380.

excerpt precedes the speaker conveying the tale of her babies as they tumble through ‘all the dateless turns and spans of infancy’ and illustrates her pondering over the sinister vine that holds some of her young ones’ attention:

Some few linger at the mystery vine that laughs at masonry,
A leafy spy on indoor secrets, its grape-eyes gleaming -
What are they looking at? What do they taste like?²⁶⁴

The space of containment is invaded by the presence of the perturbing vine that is chillingly likened to a spy on ‘indoor secrets’. Again, the house becomes a space in which secretive, mysterious happenings take place – where the true identity of woman materialises, perhaps. Indeed, there is something appealing in the idea of women simply being women without the curtailment and labelling that society outside inflicts upon them. However, Riding, like Loy, Stevenson and Rouse, never verbalises what the secrets that infiltrate the house might be. The domestic sphere continues to remain an elusive mystery. It is through the semblance of home that we envisage this space as being ‘other’; a space that resists linguistic codes, and where confusion and fear co-exist with a dismantling of identity and the simple state of being.

The Domicide of Home

It might seem strange to conclude this chapter with a poet who rarely writes directly about the domestic sphere. In all four of her collections, *The English Earthquake* (1992), *Bargain with the Watchman* (1999), *One Two II: A Songbook* (2003) and *Double Crossing: New and Selected Poems* (2005), contemporary poet, Eva Salzman, refers to the home space so infrequently, and when she does she is so unnervingly subversive that her poems warrant

²⁶⁴ Riding, ‘Dead Birth’, *The Poems of Laura Riding*, p. 381.

critical analysis. One might surmise that she has a deep sense of resistance to the home for a number of reasons. Firstly, that she is unwilling to enter into a debate about a space that is essentially private; secondly, the home space is of little consequence to her and doesn't capture her imagination or provoke a reaction; thirdly, it could be that in releasing herself from what some poets might see as their 'duty' to raise awareness of this specifically gendered space she has made a conscious decision not to conform to gendered poetics and literary stereotypes. For whatever reasons Salzman chooses not to engage in this type of domestic dialogue it is clear that this absence becomes significant not only because of her gender but also because of her cultural duality. Denying or ignoring the notion that she can comfortably inhabit a space of her own called home, either in person or through the voice of the speakers in her poems, seems to suggest that writing as a woman plays on her mind continuously; if she sees woman as other, as essentially exiled from patriarchal discourse, it seems surprising that the home offers her little consolation or warmth even if it evokes displacement like some of the other poems mentioned earlier in the chapter. Likewise, the idea of being culturally rootless *and* displaced within the confines of one's abode suggests a double bind for the Anglo-American woman poet – she not only becomes suspended between two countries but also finds it hard to negotiate between the inside space and the outside space as a woman. Never is there a time where she feels she 'belongs', not even to herself.

Even though Salzman's poems offer little domestic fodder, the small references to the home that often creep into the most unlikely of her poems is significant. Usually, she offers a line, a phrase or a stanza that becomes both revealing and tantalising. Amongst the works that

invoke a sense of the home in some shape or form, Salzman invokes the suspect nature of the home no more profoundly than in her poems 'Sin', 'Soliloquy' and 'Closing Time'. In the first poem of the group, 'Sin', her speaker tells of a grubby hotel room where domestic items sparsely furnish the space, evoking images of alienation and displacement. It is the images of the 'chairs knifed with the dead initials/ of those who went too far, or never far enough',²⁶⁵ that act as a poignant and permanent reminder of personal and perhaps painful experiences. The chairs are literally scarred with remnants of other lives, of past experiences alien to the present self that inhabits the space, evoking a sense of displacement and discomfort at visualising second-hand the intimacy of others. Another of her poems, 'Soliloquy', also explores the discomfort of intruding on others' personal space as the speaker compares his/her life in parallel to those of the inhabitants next door. The speaker is clearly distracted by the thought of the neighbours experiencing the pain of childbirth whilst simultaneously anticipating her/his own pleasant evening watching a play. Yet, it is the following lines which clearly reveal the discomfort of intruding upon others' intimate space in the home: 'Last night through the wall/ at one I heard their privacy – voices, low/ and purposeful, a shifting.'²⁶⁶ Apart from these disconcerting lines, the poem is seemingly tranquil, serene almost as the speaker is thankful that 'Great pain is somewhere else'. Yet, we sense that inadvertently overhearing the intimacy of others' personal spaces is a painful and unwelcome experience.

²⁶⁵ Salzman, 'Sin', *The English Earthquake*, p. 26.

²⁶⁶ Salzman, 'Soliloquy', *The English Earthquake*, p. 47.

Even more sinister are the chilling lines in her poem 'Closing Time' which follow the observation of pub goers emptying out of the local pub: 'The suicide of going home, and on/ to rooms made strange by darkness.'²⁶⁷ Going home is compared to the literal ending of one's life, the self becomes non-existent and displaced within the confines of the house space. Yet disturbingly, this reasserts the idea that Salzman is uncomfortable with the home space, not so much because of her disregard for the domestic role as such but more for the sense that the self is in danger of dissipating in such an environment. Her speakers project a definite need for self-affirmation by the outside world and seem only to thrive and, indeed, to live, whilst in the presence of others. Salzman's home poems are specifically ungendered, however the female-associated loss of self within the home space is of paramount importance to her speakers in her poetry. Salzman, as if to emulate Kristeva's views, seems to defy a symbolic order that perceives the home in binaries such as haven/prison, and, rather, illustrates it as harbouring the very invisibility of the living self – a living death. The home is ultimately the place where life ends.

Conclusion

This selection of poetry has shown the intricate ways in which the home has been expressed in the twentieth century by Anglo-American women poets. In terms of Lefebvre's 'representational spaces' that recognise the importance of re-imagining physical space, these poems illustrate how traditional assumptions of the home as a domestic area designated solely to women, are contested. A large proportion of the poems convey conflict within the home and are usually explicitly gendered in their approach. The overwhelming

²⁶⁷ Salzman, 'Closing Time' *The English Earthquake*, p. 32.

sense of conflict presents us with the idea that the poem is not necessarily a space in which tensions can be soothed, but rather that the poem becomes a space of exposure. This is especially evident in poems by Loy, whose voice is often strident or satirical in tone. Her feminist-driven impulse is by far the most striking, especially for a poet who was writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Later poets do convey a deep-rooted unease for the domestic realm but are not so willing to adopt such outspokenness as Loy. Rouse makes use of dreams and fairytales to subvert domestic ideals surrounding the home which seems to suggest that she wants to distance herself from the situation of displacement itself. Levertov is the only poet who manages to express the home positively which she achieves through verbalising her memories within the space of the text. She is also the one poet who seems to acknowledge that the home can evoke displacement but conveys how this is not necessarily because of gender. Levertov characteristically regards the condition of the outsider to be a condition of the human self in general and not necessarily a female impediment. Literary symbols are also significant in that they suggest strictly marked out territories; passages, steps, walls, windows and doors all compound the idea that women poets are consciously looking for alternative realms where they might escape domestic confinement. All the poems, in the light of this, achieve to a large extent, Kristeva's mantra that asks women to go forth and embrace a feminized space that allows them the freedom and autonomy to verbalise these conflicts even if it not possible to fully resolve them.

Chapter Five

Journeys: The Space of Inbetween

All the chapters in this thesis are concerned with the notion of inbetweenness and the ways in which the poets capture it in their work. This state of inbetween is often evoked by the poets' experience of moving in and between two places and their understanding of cultural duality, or by their outsider status as women, or at other times, it is often explicitly revealed in their use of symbols which gesture towards a strongly mapped out spatial territory that contrasts inside with outside. The journey as a 'spatial practice', however, is a very literal area of inbetween. While homes and places can evoke inbetweenness, the journey *is* inbetweenness. In Lefebvrian terms, the 'spatial practice' of journeying between places combined with the representations of these spatial practices which can be seen in the routes and tropes of travel, produces some interesting appropriations in the form of 'representational spaces' or poems. The concept of the representational space opens up a range of possibilities and imaginings. As outlined in the previous chapters, the poem is a healing, cathartic space where this sense of dislocation can at the very least be verbalised and possibly even harmonised within the poem.

This chapter draws upon Lefebvre's representational spaces to read a range of poems that explore the redemptive nature of travelling and illustrates how the journey space is highly subjective and often feminized. Again, the textual freedom to be found within the representational space of the poem is explored. Symbols of windows, mirrors and glass are

again a defining feature in this chapter and suggest the potentiality of the journey for intense self-scrutiny and self-reflection. The appeal of journeys to Anglo-American poets is also evident. In a recent interview, Ruth Fainlight explains the allure of the journey: 'I mean personally, in my own life, journeys are wonderful. They are just these spaces between that one can inhabit and be nowhere.'²⁶⁸ The allure of 'nowhere', unbelievable as it may sound at first, might be appealing for its suggestion of role abandonment as women, mothers and writers. Kristeva's feminized conceptions of space are also drawn upon in this chapter to argue that this space of 'nowhere' is indeed somewhere very significant. In 'Women's Time' she speaks of the desire of creative women to find solace in writing literature that defies social orders; somewhere Kristeva defines as a 'counter-society' which can be achieved through literature 'because it makes a game, a space of fantasy and pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of social signs, the words of everyday communication.'²⁶⁹ In terms of the journey then, this space enables women poets to contest previous narratives of displacement by imagining a space of 'fantasy and pleasure'. Caren Kaplan has also written extensively on the concept of travel, distance and exile in her text, *Questions of Travel* (1995). Like Kristeva she also speaks from a feminist perspective and is excited by the prospect of new narratives being opened up in relation to travel:

In the age of telecommunications and transnational cultural production ... distance does not inevitably lead to exile or war but to new subjectivities that produce new relationships to space as well as time so that distance is not only a safety zone or field of tension but a terrain that houses new subjects of criticism.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Ruth Fainlight, interviewed by Melanie Petch on 24th April 2004.

²⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.) *The Feminist Reader: Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 212.

²⁷⁰ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 142.

As well as considering the importance of new relationships to space, Caplan also mentions time. Time is also a significant concern of many of the poems in this chapter and indicates one of the only marked chronological developments. The relationship between journeys spaces and time was different for a modernist writer like Loy who was writing in an age of rapid technological development and the advent of speed, than it is for later poets such as Levertov and Fainlight for whom speed is taken for granted. All in all, the journey space is a fruitful line of enquiry and the poems in this chapter indicate a strong preoccupation with re-imagining the space of inbetween.

Like previous chapters, the poetry presented here is not ordered in an historical framework but one that is dependent solely upon thematic expressions of journeys that gather in clusters. Not all the poets are represented in the chapter either even though the journey theme is a recurring motif for nearly all them. Again, the poetry is selected for its ability to compellingly engage the reader in the harmonisation between self and text. Each subsection looks at various motifs and symbols that typify the metaphysical journey between a female self and the text. Dual nationality, although a less obvious narrative in this chapter on journeys, is significant nonetheless as it expresses an inbetweenness that is more profound to the Anglo-American poet. The chapter begins by exploring the journey as a space of 'other' where time itself is suspended and the journey becomes a vacuum. Anne Stevenson so typically demonstrates this otherness and reveals her preoccupation with borders, margins and thresholds and the conflict that lies within the crossing of them. Alongside Stevenson, Fainlight and Salzman have also been selected for their strong evocations of a self both lost and found within the journey space. Mirrors, glass and

windows also become motifs with which to group another cluster of poems. This subsection is self-consciously female in its outlook. Again, Fainlight and Stevenson are masterful in their handling of a self-reflective approach to the female self, especially when considering the experience of aging. The chapter then considers Plath and the imaginative potential of the journey. With Plath there is a real sense that she is encompassing the 'imaginative playground' metaphor offered to us by Kristeva by re-imagining a strange world where beings can materialise into new selves within the space of the journey. The chapter concludes with Loy and the concepts of both time and speed. Grounded alongside the modernist insistency for new technology and the exhilaration that this brought to early twentieth-century passengers offers a less subjective view of the journey space and indicates that occasionally the text can be a space of sheer escapism, relishing in the essence of time and speed rather than seeking to over-analyse them.

Journey as a Space of 'Other'

Anne Stevenson is a poet who throughout her lengthy career has been particularly compelled by the sensation of travelling – compelled enough to write some interesting poems on the subject. Primarily, Stevenson perceives the journey very much as a space of in-between, somewhere she is not always entirely comfortable inhabiting, yet, as she registers, it can also be seductive at the same time. Indeed, borders and thresholds are significant themes in her work at large. One of her earliest poems, 'A River' (*Reversals*, 1969), although not entirely about a journey, emphasises a preoccupation with transitory

points or junctures: 'The line between land and water'.²⁷¹ Yet, this is not simply a literal description, as is so often the case with Stevenson, this poem also conveys the cerebral connection between landscape and mind:

Neither side of the river
Is a mountain, and no mind
Hesitates, moving from one
Bank to the other.

(lines 12-13)

This poem seems to pre-empt a constant thread in her poetic oeuvre of borders, margins and spaces of inbetween. Even one of her recent collections, *A Report From the Border* (2003), by its very title suggests that Stevenson is concerned with being on the edge of things. However, rather than viewing this space in negative terms, Stevenson acknowledges the benefits: 'that's the whole point about borders,' she says. 'It's the best place from which to be able to see both sides.'²⁷² As the following poems suggest, the journey space, as a space of in-between, is a captivating and creatively rich place for a writer to explore and re-appropriate.

In her poem, 'From the Motorway' (*The Other House*, 1990), Stevenson perceives how the journey can be a suspension of reality as she temporarily loses any sense of self: 'but consider the bliss/ of sitting absolutely numbed to your/ nulled mind'.²⁷³ The journey is a space where the mind can unwind, yet, she also recognises that the pace of the car is too swift to entirely 'examine the contents' (line 6). The landscape or 'contents' become

²⁷¹ Anne Stevenson, 'A River', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 47, line 1.

²⁷² Alfred Hickling, 'Border Crossings', *The Guardian*, Saturday October 2, 2004. Online source: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/poetry/features/0,,1317578,00.html> (accessed June 2007).

²⁷³ Stevenson, 'On the Motorway', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Bloodaxe Books: Tarsset, 2005), pp. 139-140, lines 7-9.

irrelevant, for it is the state of numbness that holds the allure. This is a poem that is very much centred upon the concept of time – the self is suspended as time falters too, despite the visceral movement of the car. In fact, it is not until: ‘you’re there, wherever there/ is, ready to be someone in/ Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester’ (lines 13-15). Paradoxically, once the actual journey itself ends, time resumes and the self is prepared to be ‘someone’. Strangely, we sense that the body is disengaged from the mind. And it is here, in this temporary suspension from material conditions, that Kristeva’s assertions of creating a parallel universe seem so convincing, particularly for women poets, who for a short while, perhaps, have no external demands upon their time – the most precious commodity of all. And yet, the poem does have an air of ambiguity about it. Not only is the journey seen as a physical act of being transported from one location to another, it also not an entirely empty space where one can simply be with no external demands. It also has the potential to become a gateway to one’s past: ‘while there on all sides,/ lie your unwrapped destinations, lanes trickling off into childhood’ (lines 31-33). Stevenson expresses the potential of uncovering her past sound as delicious as peeling wrappers from a sweetie, and yet her final line deflects again by stating that those places of childhood are ‘nowhere anyone would like to get to’ (line 36). Clearly, it is neither past, future, nor even present that the subject desires, but a place of quiet stasis. In Chapter Two, I referred to Heilbrun’s important contribution to feminist theory in the light of marginal places as being positive retreats for women writers rather than a place of banishment. Heilbrun asserts that, ‘The threshold, on the contrary, is the place where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays.’²⁷⁴ Stevenson’s articulation of her own marginal space

²⁷⁴ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Women’s Lives: The View From the Threshold* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,

(that is, the journey) enables her to write out the joys and frustrations of life both inside and outside material conditions. The journey is re-appropriated and adapted to convey the bliss and pain of living on the edge. Either way, in a creative sense, this sense of being rooted outside the centre clearly offers a poet like Stevenson perspective and insight.

Stevenson wrote two poems about train journeys which again feature in *A Report from the Border*. They both enhance the curious, soul-searching aspects of travelling. In '17.14 Out of Newcastle', she manages to convey the very uncomfortable experience of sitting on a crowded train. This intimate contact with strangers forces her to examine the impact their oppressive closeness is having upon her. The speaker of the poem makes it clear that being on a crowded train is where the 'damned unlucky/ live on in body/ when the spirit dies.'²⁷⁵ This poem is metaphysical in its scope as the awfulness of the situation is likened to a place that only the condemned should inhabit. And yet, the train journey and its in-betweenness also seems to symbolise the state of the poet's mind:

On such a train,

in some murky
siding of a poet's brain,
Limbo was devised

where there's no agony
and no joy, either,
just fleshy emptiness

sweating out the space between
weary I-am-ness
and the unloved pack.

1999), pp. 101-102.

²⁷⁵ Anne Stevenson, '17.14 Out of Newcastle', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 104, lines 12-14.

And here, we see the potential of this 'space between' as the speaker names it as a poet's space and therefore implying the potential of a creative dynamic. Kristeva sees this important area as 'a *signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space.'²⁷⁶ Although there is a tinge of world-weariness about the tone which is exacerbated in the desolate scene outside the train, there is also a sense that the poet is at work amidst the despair of it all – her poetic antennae alert to the subtle nuances of human experience. The poem concludes: 'Still, some undeniable voltage/ wants to connect us' (lines 50-51). This poem echoes another poem from *A Report from the Border* which is also given a rather disengaged title, 'The Branch Line'. This poem is slightly less oppressive in that it focuses upon what is happening outside the train window, but it is important nonetheless, for we witness the emergence of another metaphysical discourse in response to the journey experience. The poem concludes:

Meaningless life, I am reading in the TLS,
a *nexus of competing purposes* ...

God is impossible.

Life is impossible.

But here it is.²⁷⁷

On the one hand, we envisage the way the journey offers a mental space that frees the speaker from a degree of social responsibility in material conditions, on the other; the journey can also become a gateway to an elevated metaphysical state of being.

²⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in Belsey and Moore eds., p. 214.

²⁷⁷ Anne Stevenson, 'Branch Line', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 57, lines 28-32.

Fainlight wrote an uncharacteristically stylistically experimental poem called 'The Boat' (*Another Full Moon*, 1976) which also beautifully captures the 'otherness' of the journey experience. The language is highly evocative of disengagement with both reality and time and implicitly suggests a poem that conveys more than the title suggests. Typographically, the poem is more in the style of Levertov or Loy – the sentences are fractured and space intersperses the text which appears in the shape of a boat, perhaps, or even more, a fish. The overall effect gives the impression of space dissolving on the page and this reflects the disarming resonances embedded in the poem:

Who is that person I see distant so busy
 on the opposite shore I should join her
 she's waiting
 a winter tree with scratching twigs
 that won't let the wind be its master
 she looks like me
 but I'm drifting away slipping a boat
 from its mooring out to the centre of the lake
 where I'll float and sleep and dream
 a black boat
 in the heavy colourless silence empty²⁷⁸

Again, the speaker is watching another woman, and like Stevenson's poem the two become almost indistinguishable: 'she looks like me'. And yet the poem is seeking for connection as well as simultaneously speaking of disengagement. The words, 'drifting', 'slipping', 'float', 'dream' and 'empty' give a strangely ethereal impression and one that best reflects a speaker who is also fragmented, faltering, lost, perhaps. Kathleen Fraser recognises the potential of manipulating language for the woman poet:

One claims the activity of invention through sheer necessity. It is as if you can't help yourself or, conversely, that you are impelled to escape the

²⁷⁸ Ruth Fainlight, 'The Boat', *Selected Poems* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 49, lines 1-11.

predictable as it has come to limit your movement – excluding, pre-editing, denying not only nuance and level of perception but how one's spirit might move between the inside and the outside. The next opening of the language. The next hands-on structure. As poets were meant to do.²⁷⁹

Fraser implies an essentialist approach to writing, as an impulse that is driven by the body to present something that cannot be expressed by the 'predictable' forms of discourse she longs to escape. The inventive stylistics of Fainlight's poem enables her to convince her reader of a fragile state of mind. The fractured form also reflects the desperate connection she longs to make with the other woman across the shore who refuses to let the wind be her master. As the boat pulls further and further away, so the speaker is left disjointed and lonely. The journey becomes a place where female affirmation is desperately wanted and yet it is also a place to reflect upon what is lost – the poem lets these thoughts breathe.

Contemporary Anglo-American poet, Eva Salzman, uses takes a romantic perspective in her poem, 'Air Mail'. This is a poem, primarily, which expresses the impossibility of words travelling long distances. We see how the great Atlantic gulf between Britain and America distorts the meaning of her words – allowing them to lose their spontaneity:

As a battleground for love, the Atlantic
is too enormous and too romantic-sounding
for the bad language. Daggers rust,
fall useless into the sea.

Take the words: *I love you*.
Disembodied, though tantalising,
they arrive at your hearing.
Anybody might have sent them

²⁷⁹ Kathleen Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 205.

to the wrong address.
Or: *I ache for you*.
The *ache* has journeyed long distances,
is tired with itself.²⁸⁰

The journey space, in other words, becomes an event that cannot transport meaning. The speaker uses the example, '*I ache for you*' as a way of explaining that time and distance disembodies words from their initial meaning and exemplifies how the journey space is eroticized. The poem suggests that words, that travel, that exchanging dialogue are only heart-felt if they exist as a real-time transaction. So when the speaker concludes, 'We are just our words',²⁸¹ the reality is that the self is simply as meaningless as the shapes of letters on a page. In a recent interview, Salzman explains the rationale for this poem and others in *The English Earthquake* collection:

This poem, and others in that book, have that learned nationalism of the displaced person ... and that learned nationalism breeds its own language which is then used for all transactions – including romantic ones.²⁸²

Clearly, Salzman's speaker not only experiences the physical loss of a lover but also the loss of self as the language of the displaced person fails at the crucial moment. I often find the term 'displacement' too crude a word to define the status of these women, primarily because of the positive dynamic at work in their poetry. A sense of being lost is harmonised within the space of the poem and the fact that it is articulated at all suggests that the search for a feminized space that can contain all the hurt and pain of being female has been fully realised.

²⁸⁰ Eva Salzman, 'Air Mail', *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 49.

²⁸¹ Salzman, 'Air Mail', p. 49.

²⁸² Eva Salzman interviewed by Lidia Vianu on 28 January 2003,
http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/eva_salzman.htm [Accessed 9 March 2004].

Eva Salzman captures the image of a quite literal threshold in her poem 'Station-Waiting'.

Her speaker expresses both excitement and anxiety that is felt whilst waiting at a station:

But trains make gladness blossom in me
sudden and hard
when I watch them pass. Aboard
it is another thing, of course.²⁸³

When watching trains pass by, the emphasis becomes centred on the travel or journey of other passengers, the excitement felt, second hand of another's experience into the unknown. Yet, being aboard the train oneself seems to ignite a sense that a journey empties the self into an empty and terrifying vacuum. The following passage exemplifies how the experience of leaving one place and entering another is both violent and final:

Leave-taking
should be swift, a flinging
of self into a great blankness and behind
the screen-door of a lit-porch slams shut. The shock
of that bang should hurry you along.²⁸⁴

As far as the speaker is concerned, leave-taking should be as cold and free from emotion as possible. Rather than sadness and remorse, we see the process of crossing the threshold between leaving and arriving to be quick and aggressive. The self is flung into a 'great blankness' which rather than triggering associations of new possibilities seems to be more closely linked to a loss of self – a sense that the self is in need of rebuilding and reconfiguration before the hasty arrival at the destination. We see how Salzman portrays a very literal threshold which does not allow one to retrace one's steps; it is a space which must be traversed as quickly as possible, so much so, that we might wonder whether the

²⁸³ Eva Salzman, 'Station-Waiting', *The English Earthquake* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p. 16.

²⁸⁴ Salzman, 'Station-Waiting', pp. 16-17.

self is ever able to recover from such a traumatic experience. However, Salzman's *English Earthquake* collection is mostly full of observations on various places (usually England) and the experience of travelling to and from them; in 'Running Away from Home', her speaker relishes the prospect of leaving the mundane present and travelling to somewhere new: 'Do stations make you want to run somewhere -/skip out, tear up your fortunes,/your lot?'²⁸⁵ Again, there is a sense that this is exciting if happening to someone else, as she later illustrates: 'But thank god/ life is thrilling constantly somewhere better than you will ever be.'²⁸⁶ According to the speaker in the poem, the dream of someone else being flung into oblivion is clearly more appealing than undertaking the wrench oneself. In so much of Salzman's work she conveys a palpable fear of the self and of being forced into spaces where one can only self-reflect. The great blankness that she speaks of seeks only to highlight her fear of confronting her own solitary self and illustrates a desire to seek self-affirmation from an outer reality inhabited constantly by others who can reflect this back. She seems constantly to run from the self she fears. Salzman sees the allure of 'the great blankness' as being too unsettling and something she would rather reject altogether.

Leverlov also presents the journey as a space of 'otherness' in her poem 'By Rail Through the Earthly Paradise Perhaps Bedfordshire', although her speaker admits that the pace of time within this space is slightly too fast:

The train
moves me past it too fast, not much,
just a little, I don't want

²⁸⁵ Salzman, 'Running Away from Home', *The English Earthquake*, p. 15.

²⁸⁶ Salzman, 'Running Away from Home', p. 15.

to stay for ever.²⁸⁷

We can see the appeal of this journey – not lasting for ever, but just long enough to take note of one's surroundings, perhaps. But like Stevenson, Levertov also describes the desensitized state of absolute bliss whilst travelling:

I'm not hungry,
not lonely. It seems
at times I want nothing,
no human giving and taking.
Nothing I see
fails to give pleasure,

no thirst for righteousness
dries my throat, I am silent
and happy, and troubled only
by my own happiness. Looking,

looking and naming. I wish the train now
would halt for me at a station in the fields,
(the name goes by
unread).

(lines 22-35)

We see how the speaker does not need or desire anything and that this state of perfection is free from outside forces that seek to restrict one from simply being. It is in this completely simple state that the speaker is most at one with her/his self, yet admits that this happy state is troubling. For women, however, this space has been written about for decades. In 1929, Virginia Woolf recognised the need for women to have a room of their own – a space to think or to write – this selection of poetry shows that women actively seek time out from the pressures of everyday life where they can simply be. The journey space is perhaps the modern day alternative to a room of one's own. The desire to temporarily suspend time – to

²⁸⁷ Denise Levertov, 'By Rail through the Earthly Paradise, Perhaps Bedfordshire', *Footprints* (New York: New Directions, 1972), lines 9-12.

be in a state of neither here nor there is seen to be particularly attractive to the speaker in Levertov's poem. The title of the poem suggests that the actual place has become secondary to the journey process itself: 'perhaps Bedfordshire' is tagged on with indifference, almost as an afterthought. And after wishing the train would stop in the fields for a little while we can see the unimportance of the exact location: '(the name goes by unread).' Levertov desires the tangible experience of being able to physically step into this nothingness – this state of in-between. Interestingly in her poem, 'From a Plane', she muses upon the idea that the experience of journeying inbetween places allows us a space of 'revisioning solace' – a space, she implies, that allows us to reflect upon the world which we inhabit. Delightfully, this poem harbours environmental compassion for the world and seems thankful that from a distance 'the great body/ [is] not torn apart, though raked and raked/ by our claws'.²⁸⁸ She illustrates beautifully her love of landscapes and her desire for time to reflect between them.

Mirrors, Windows and Glass

I mentioned earlier that these journeys rarely depict an overt female sensibility. And yet, certain symbols, such as mirrors, windows and glass, are all perhaps linked to areas of heightened female awareness. Stevenson writes compellingly on the subject of female affirmation in a poem called 'Travelling Behind Glass' from her collection by the same name, published in 1974. It is an interesting but lengthy poem which anticipates similar issues to those of her contemporary, Ruth Fainlight, in a later poem, 'The Journey' (*Fifteen to Infinity*, 1983). Both poems seem to pre-empt Kristeva's theories on the pull of literature

²⁸⁸ Denise Levertov, 'From a Plane', *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 3.

for women: 'It is in the aspiration towards artistic and, in particular, literary creation,' writes Kristeva, 'that woman's desire for affirmation now manifests itself.'²⁸⁹ The glass window becomes a signifier in both Fainlight's poems for the potential of female affirmation. Stevenson's speaker conveys the journey from the mountains to the South in her car, a state that is described as being 'safe behind glass.' As the driver absorbs her surroundings, we witness how the glass window ambiguously marks a boundary between the world outside and inside the car, but also manages to fuse the two at the same time: 'Who is that woman?' her speaker asks, 'sitting .../in the shadow-broken mirror/ of her window.'²⁹⁰ At this point the two women become as one in the glass – one as reflection, the other as a tangible woman beyond the window: 'Avoiding her eyes, /I discover her own in my face,' (lines 74-75). There is a palpable sense of female affiliation as the two women merge, and yet, as they entwine, the speaker conveys the physical presence of the glass barrier between the woman's time and her own:

But only if the glass were
shattered and the vision
remained could I really
believe in the void between
my time and hers –
in the absence,
pieced out with recollections,
of all her years.

This poem is reaching out for female validation and searching, above all, for companionship in the shared activities of other women – bringing up children, 'waking, cooking, eating' (line 140).

²⁸⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1986), pp. 206-7.

²⁹⁰ Anne Stevenson, 'Travelling Behind Glass', *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 51.

As I indicated earlier, Fainlight also expresses similar themes to Stevenson's, in her poem 'The Journey'. Again, the glass/window/mirror symbol is strong and exemplifies the journey space as one which prompts self-reflection. This poem is also located on a train journey and allows her speaker to explore a much younger reflection in the train window and to reflect upon the passing of time:

Softened by the mirror of a tunnel,
my reflected face stared out, much younger,
superimposed like an old photograph.
If I sat opposite, one glance

comparing the two would be enough to inform
myself of every change that time has wrought.
Suddenly, I learned I was not other,
earlier, than what I have become

but only now am forced to recognize.²⁹¹

The train journey becomes a painful realisation of the inevitable process of ageing. The reflection in the train window momentarily misleads the speaker that the face is much younger than it really is – this quiet time allows the speaker to consider herself as if she were an observer watching objectively and how the reality would be quite different. It reflects, very much, an out of body experience. Fainlight's poem 'Passenger' also uses the train journey as a time to reflect on life choices made and to cherish her nostalgic feelings of returning to the security of childhood:

...all that urban glamour
of anonymity which makes me suffer

such nostalgia for a life rejected
and denied, makes me want to leave the train,

²⁹¹ Ruth Fainlight, 'The Journey', *Fifteen to Infinity* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp. 19-20.

walk down the street back to my neighbourhood
of launderettes, newsagents, grocery shops,

become again that watching dreaming girl
and this time live it out – one moment only
was enough before a yawning tunnel-
mouth obscured us both, left her behind.²⁹²

Again, the tunnel marks the point at which a strange realisation occurs – the speaker as a little girl is engulfed and the speaker is left to cope with the loss. Strangely, the speaker sees herself as two separate components: little girl and adult. The young girl symbolises nostalgia and youth and all that she left behind and rejected. For Fainlight, the train journey becomes symbolic as it evokes poignant images of the past and how time is presented as being suspended and static.

Plath and the Imaginative Potential of the Journey

Sylvia Plath was also moved by the experience of travelling (particularly by boat when crossing the Atlantic). The relatively slow journey by sea is accentuated in Plath's intricate observations of the surrounding seascape and the characters on board the boat. Her poem, 'On Deck' recalls an experience of being on board at midnight and watching those around her; she describes a woman who prays that she can save 'art students in West Berlin', an astrologer who dreams of becoming rich and a jeweller who is moulding his wife so that she may 'wait on him' once they set foot ashore. For Plath, the journey is a hive of possibility and creativity: 'Anything can happen where they are going.'²⁹³ Dreams and plans are plotted and visualised – all her characters seem at peace in the space they have

²⁹² Ruth Fainlight, 'Passenger', *Fifteen to Infinity* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 11.

²⁹³ Sylvia Plath, 'On Deck', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 143.

created for themselves. The speaker too, is content at the prospect of imagining the lives of others. Yet, we see the end of the journey becomes a reality check:

Moony balloons tied by a string
To their owner's wrists, the light dreams float
To be let loose at news of land.²⁹⁴

Dreams created on board are simply that, dreams. Despite their owners' attempts to secure them to their wrists, the dreams or 'moony balloons' seek freedom as soon as land becomes apparent. The space between reality and unreality is plainly demarcated by the periods of being on and off land – between destination and journey. Plath also hints at similar themes in 'Channel Crossing'; she highlights an exciting and havoc-filled boat journey and reluctantly claims that all adventures and dreams must end once the boat docks:

...all dangers
End: green shores appear; we assume our names,
Our luggage, as docks halt our brief epic; no debt
Survives arrival; we walk the plank with strangers.²⁹⁵

It is as if all the passengers become fictional characters in a play once aboard. Yet once they are ashore they 'assume' their real names, their real identities, and 'walk the plank with strangers'. Their secret world must sadly come to an end. For Plath, the journey is an exciting adventure playground where identity can be both deconstructed and reconstructed – you can, in effect, become anything you want to. The only rule she seems to make is that the self that boards the ship must be the self that leaves.

Loy, Time and Speed

Mina Loy also illustrates the significance of the train journey, although her work is

²⁹⁴ Plath, 'On Deck', p. 143

²⁹⁵ Sylvia Plath, 'Channel Crossing', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 27.

strikingly different from the poets previously mentioned. In 'Mexican Desert' Loy does not present a poem that speaks of finding space for oneself the way the other poems do. She is focused solely on the images that she sees from the train:

Vegetable cripples of drought
thrust up the parching appeal
cracking open the earth
stump-fingered cacti
and hunch-backed palm trees
belabour the cinders of twilight.²⁹⁶

The modernist preoccupation with speed and the influence of her mentor and lover, F.T. Marinetti, is paramount here as we see the fascination with charting images consecutively and accurately. Her lack of punctuation is also significant in that we do not have time to pause for breath, signifying her fascination with speed and the exciting new technological age. In his futurist doctrines, Marinetti insisted that, 'Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.'²⁹⁷ The philosophical thought of Bergson who claimed that a poem should be 'an uninterrupted sequence of images' was also important to Loy.²⁹⁸ Jane Dowson claims that by adopting this 'breathless' approach, 'the interpretive distance between reader and text is reduced.'²⁹⁹ This is interesting as the poets discussed before focus on distancing the self from reality whereas for Loy, her urgency to represent reality as it happens is almost pushed upon the reader. The concept of time is interesting as Loy is urging her reality faster forward than

²⁹⁶ Mina Loy, 'Mexican Desert', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 74.

²⁹⁷ F.T. Marinetti, 'Manifesto of Futurism,' Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, Olga Taxidou (eds.), *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), p. 251.

²⁹⁸ Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 167.

²⁹⁹ Dowson, p. 167.

any of the other poets in this study – as a participant in the early-twentieth century race for speed, Loy is seduced by the movement of the train and its effect on the landscape.

Conclusion

The journey experience is enriching in terms of the quality of the feelings it invokes in the poets. Little consideration has been given to these spaces by literary criticism in the past and this fruitful area, it is hoped, will be considered further in the future. In the course of this particular element of research, many other women poets that have written on the journey experience, such as Gillian Clarke and Mimi Khalavati, have illuminated the richness of this strand of enquiry.³⁰⁰ The journey space is literally terrifying for Salzman as she fears the loss of self this brings. For Fainlight, Levertov and Stevenson the luxurious space in suspended time allows close self-analysis and gives a deeper meaning to our notions of female 'me' time. For Plath, this inbetween space is purely fodder for her creative imagination as she invents scenarios and characters that are bristling with colour and dynamism. Modernist poet, Loy, opens up an interesting debate on the question of time within the journey space. Fascinated by the advent of speed, she documents her images with precision – speed doesn't seem to be unnerving or unsettling in any way, it is literally breathtaking. With the advent of modern technology, she is very much concerned with new and exciting ways of perceiving her outer reality and time itself is given the illusion of having been sliced in two. Whereas speed represents a faster spectrum of images for Loy, for the later poets who are no longer intrigued by the technology that takes them from one place to another, the fleeting images of their outer reality becomes insignificant – life

³⁰⁰ See their poems, 'On the Train' and 'Rubaiyet' respectively.

moves at such a fast pace that the journey is a time to reflect and immerse oneself in the solace that being neither here nor there brings. Their poetry carries with it the sense that every moment counts – the inner self must be defragmented and put back together again in a truly personal sense of space. As such, the journey becomes ever more urgent and vital for the poets writing in the latter half of the century as it enables them freedom to consider their inner self and what it means to simply ‘be’. Time is suspended momentarily and lingers just long enough for a metamorphic experience to manifest. For a significant number of the Anglo-American poets discussed, this creative space of in-between allows them to be free, for a short while, from the restrictions that their environments impose upon them.

Chapter Six

Bodies and Landscapes

Amidst a developing discussion that explores spaces, locations, gender and cultural duality, what could be more specific to the debate and to women poets than the space of the female body? In material conditions the female body is often exposed and exploited to such an extent that the possibility of reclaiming it back within the imaginative space of text is a motivating force and a vital concern of this chapter. I will argue that Anglo-American women poets use metaphors of landscape to illustrate a specifically female preoccupation with the body. The poetry charts a revealing narrative of how women redraw themselves, but also shows how the body is affected by the external landscape that envelops it. Again there is no chronological template for ordering the poems in this chapter; rather, these poems are arranged thematically and are organised around two distinct ideas. The discussion begins by addressing the conflict between body and landscape. Expressions of displacement and strangeness are frequent in these early poems as we witness how the body appears distressed by unfamiliar landscapes. In accordance with the spatial theories of Lefebvre, the body is perceived primarily as a site which is burdened 'by the weight of society's demands' and 'immediately subject to the determinants of ... space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions, axes and planes, centres and peripheries, and concrete (spatio-temporal) oppositions.'³⁰¹ Poems by Laura Riding and Denise Levertov depict the

³⁰¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974, 1999), p. 195.

body and the self as being outside these spatial symmetries, desperate for a sense of serenity in a world of chaotic fusions and discord.

The second selection of poetry illustrates the re-appropriation or re-imagination of the body and landscape and argues that they both frequently overlay one another. In other words, the preceding poems of Levertov, Sylvia Plath, and Mina Loy, actually describe the body as being a landscape. The poems offer particularly rich cartographic imagery and symbols. In this section, the energising nature of the poetry gestures towards Kristeva's principles of finding a space of fantasy and pleasure in text which is both captivating and necessary. The poetry which suggests the most strident affirmation of female identity is the writing that has a maternal focus and locates the female body as being a central component of reality. The maternal themes presented by Loy and Plath, in particular, offer some assertive analyses of the female psyche. These poems locate female bodily experiences, such as childbirth and motherhood, as being at the very centre of existence. As I have been insisting, Lefebvre is unable to articulate his spatial doctrines in connection with women specifically. Kristeva, by contrast, is able to offer a feminist agenda for the presentation of the body as a parallel world – a world where female affirmation can be articulated, if not achieved. She claims that the very act of identifying with what she calls 'the potency of the imaginary' illustrates 'women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders.'³⁰² In doing this, Kristeva embraces the prospect of women being able to

³⁰² Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1986, 1996), p. 207.

articulate 'the enigmas of the body'.³⁰³ Kristeva notices the possibility of subverting patriarchal definitions of the female body by committing the subversive act of writing poetry. As we have seen in other chapters, the textual space of the poem is potentially powerful, especially for women poets, in that it can harmonise the discord felt in very tangible conditions. The imaginary space of the text is inhabited by women poets precisely for its prospect of autonomy and freedom, and certainly, in this chapter, a space where they can narrate their own bodily cartographies.

The Body and the Effects of Landscape

Laura (Riding) Jackson's dramatic monologue, 'Laura and Francisca', published in 1931, conveys the story of speaker, Laura, and her visit to the island of Mallorca with a young child, named Francisca. The Mallorcan landscape – and especially Deyá – was one that was particularly well known to (Riding) Jackson seeing as she lived there with Robert Graves between 1929 and 1936, leaving only at the start of the Spanish Civil War. The following example illustrates an ambiguous relationship between landscape and body and shows the speaker questioning who she is in these surroundings. This poem was written at a poignant time in Riding's own life as she had not long recovered from a failed suicide attempt in 1929. Obviously, she had reached intolerable depths to have contemplated such an act and this poem, at times, seems like an attempt to both affirm and negate a solid sense of identity:

And I? I in Deyá am
No more envisageable phantasm
Than the problematic child, Francisca,
Then where am I, to seem a someone

³⁰³ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', p. 207.

In the world, filling a chair and housed
At an address that reaches me
By means of this make-believe body –
For never did I move or dwell
Outside myself – then where am I?³⁰⁴

(Riding) Jackson spells out the dilemma of not being able to locate one's body in the immediate and material conditions she finds herself in. The speaker seems certain that she has never moved or dwelled 'outside' her body, yet we sense that in the beautiful Mallorcan village of Deyá, she has become transparent, unreal, make-believe. The insistent repetition of, 'Then where am I?' haunts the poem as she asks what it takes 'to seem a someone in this world'. What she wants is 'an address that reaches' her – or as Lefebvre and Kristeva would hypothesise, an escape into an imaginary realm which 'overlays physical space.'³⁰⁵ Riding asserts the significance of the external landscape and its compounding effects on the body in its potential to make us feel good or bad about ourselves. If the image reflected back to us is deemed to be the most perfect image that we can imagine then this is where we feel most happy. If, on the other hand, the environment projects an image of something with which we cannot identify, then we are in danger of losing a sense of who we are – our perception of place and being in the world. One is always painfully aware, however, that Riding's own fragile emotional state would have rendered her rootless in a psychical sense wherever she had chosen to reside in those dark moments before and after her suicide attempt. She self-consciously reflects the sensations of displacement more succinctly than any other poet in this study and without doubt her insistent preoccupation with abstract

³⁰⁴ Laura (Riding) Jackson, 'Laura and Francisca', *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1980), p. 357.

³⁰⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 39.

concepts such as identity, truth and knowledge drove her to produce some of the most ambiguous and painfully self-analytical poems of the twentieth century.

Denise Levertov's poem 'Wind Song' also has echoes of Riding's search for complete bodily wholeness. Levertov's poem portrays the image of a small, solitary ember that whirls around in the wind. The poem begins with the chilling words, 'Whó am I? Whó am I?',³⁰⁶ Reminiscent of the softness of a breeze, the words, like Riding's, convey the sense that her body is in pieces as it searches for somewhere to rest and feel complete. 'Who am I?' Levertov's speaker seems to ask, highly aware that her consciousness is one of two halves – located between her old environment and her new, between England and America. Indeed, it is hard not to read the tale of the whirling, little ember as an autobiographical account of Levertov's own experience of transplantation. I have recounted in previous chapters how Levertov's memories of her place of birth and her adopted land are generally fond ones, yet she often invokes the transitory period between two worlds and reveals a sense of disembodiment in doing so. This displacement comes across strongly in the following lines:

My dust burns
in the past and flies before me
into the whirling future,
the Old World, the New World, my soul scattered
across the continents
in the named places and the named and unnamed
shadowy faces, ...³⁰⁷

The exchange between the Old and New Worlds speaks pertinently of the plight of the Anglo-American poet who seeks to verbalise her search for self-recognition in the

³⁰⁶ Denise Levertov, 'Wind Song', *Relearning the Alphabet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 62.

³⁰⁷ Levertov, 'Wind Song', p. 62.

reflection of two very different lands. Levertov sees the imaginary potential of this poem as being a site where she can explore the question: Who am I? Levertov ponders an alternative reality in this poem (although much of her writing also posits her as a stable inhabitant amongst her surroundings, particularly in the natural world she adores) where this imaginary, textual world attempts to amalgamate two locations and illustrates the complex interface of two cultures with her very soul dispersed across continents.

Levertov's poetry is characteristically optimistic and she often makes very strong links between the female body and the natural world that envelops her. Levertov generally perceives the regenerating influences of the external landscape which enriches the body at the same time as reflecting back the poignant reminder of mortality. 'Threat' is a poem taken from the last collection she wrote before her death in 1997, *Sands of the Well* (1998), and responds to the overwhelming presence of a big pinetree located just outside her house. However, as is so often the case with Levertov, the poem's undertones are all-consuming:

... you become aware that always,
under respect, under your faith
in the pinetree's beauty, there lies
the fear it will crash some day
down on your house, on you in your bed,
on the fragility of the safe
dailiness you have almost
grown used to.³⁰⁸

Levertov depicts the enormity of living alongside the natural world and the respect in which one must do so. Always, in this poem, and in numerous other poems by this writer, we are made aware of a sense of foreboding – a constant awareness that nature has the capacity to

³⁰⁸ Denise Levertov, 'Threat', *Sands of the Well* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 5, lines 12-19.

engulf us and to relinquish life as we know it³⁰⁹. The deep, meditative reflections she has on her surroundings are best explained by the poet herself in the essay, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', in which she speaks of the vital relationship between experience and poetic form. She speaks of the unfettered techniques she adopts in her poetry to reveal the discoveries she makes, which are, she claims, in direct opposition to prescribed poetic forms. At its basic level she sees organic form as being for writers who 'have to have a free hand' and for 'recognizing what we perceive ... is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such a poetry is exploratory.'³¹⁰ Levertov beautifully explains the almost spiritual beginnings of her poems:

as the poet stands open mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the Poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision, of crystallization, in which some inkling of the correspondence between those elements occurs; and it occurs as words. If he forces a beginning before this point, it won't work. These words sometimes remain the first, sometimes in the completed poem their eventual place may be elsewhere, or they may turn out to have been only forerunners, which fulfilled their function in bringing him to the words which are the actual beginning of the poem. It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of being let in to the possibility of the poem, must follow through, letting the experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Another of Levertov's poems that reflects this sense of nature engulfing human existence is 'Living While it May' which recalls the impending roots of an elm tree that threaten the structures of the speaker's house.

³¹⁰ Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form' in *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1960), pp. 8-9.

³¹¹ Ibid.

For Levertov, the very essence of experience becomes a poem – outer landscapes, filtered through her inner meditations become linguistic explorations of both self and the environment the self inhabits. As she makes clear, a poet must always remain faithful to the original ‘moment of vision’ and this will ensure the authenticity of conveying experience. Indeed, her use of the word ‘inscape’ – borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins – invokes the inner patterns of a poem by revealing something unique in the way objects or things interconnect with each other and the world. As we have become accustomed with Levertov, poetic form is not something that is pre-meditated, as it is with a poet like Stevenson, but something that manifests as a result of the intensity of contemplation. As a result, her work characteristically deploys free verse with the unshackled use of words and rhythm to convey experiences as if straight from the body itself. Levertov’s poetry reflects an understanding that the body is fragile but precious – outer landscapes evoke the primal understanding that our bodies are merely temporary inhabitants in this world. Unlike Stevenson and Riding who desperately long to establish a sense of self within an outer reality, but fail, with Levertov, the body can be enlivened in the imposing presence of the natural landscape. The merging of body and landscape, or the inherent desire to merge body and landscape, is perhaps an echo of primal merging, such as between mother and child. The representational space of the poem again suggests that the disorientating experience of unfamiliarity can possibly be questioned and ameliorated within text, and also that the potential merging between body and landscape can be tested out and explored.

In Levertov’s final collection of poetry, *Sands of the Well* (1998) she consistently embraces the intimate relationship between body and landscape. Her poem, ‘Sojourns in the Parallel

World' demonstrates further her appreciation and respect for the parallel, natural world she acknowledges we live alongside. The following example demonstrates how the body and its human passions are both intrinsically linked as well as separated from the landscape:

We live our dreams of human passions,
cruelties, dreams, concepts,
crimes and the exercise of virtue
in and beside a world devoid
of our preoccupations, free
from apprehension – though affected
certainly by our actions. A world
parallel to our own though overlapping
we call it Nature;³¹²

The space of the poem affords Levertov the opportunity to explore two competing and overlapping worlds together. Another of her poems entitled 'Wall' also portrays the overlapping of body and landscape and specifically captures the allure of a stretch of ocean that rears 'between the hills that hold it'.³¹³ She speaks of the moment in which one longs to force oneself into the very fabric of the landscape itself:

don't you feel you could go and go
swift as hurricane till you
flung yourself at its wall, its
blue wall of spider silver
and passed like Alice
into the blind mirror?³¹⁴

Levertov lays bare the juncture between landscape and self – the flinging of self into the landscape, or what she refers to as the 'blind mirror'. One steps into one's own reflection at the same moment one steps into the oceanic landscape. Disconcertingly, this transition is also enhanced by the switch from present tense to past tense, intensifying the bodily

³¹² Denise Levertov, 'Sojourns in the Parallel World', *Sands of the Well* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 49.

³¹³ Denise Levertov, 'Wall', *Sands of the Well* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 8.

³¹⁴ Denise Levertov, 'Wall', *Sands of the Well* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 8.

sensation of being and then leaving. This idea of crossing thresholds – the point between two worlds – is also perhaps Levertov's personal wrestle with her own impending mortality; the final years of her life were overshadowed with cancer and one would expect her to have contemplated time and time again her own imminent departure from the world she responded to with such fierce intensity. Not only does this poem illustrate the physical act of departing one world and entering another, it also marks the turning point in this chapter; the point where the self goes from becoming affected by landscape to the very act of being a landscape, or, indeed, the very centre of existence, whether this manifests bodily, spiritually, or imaginatively. The following selection of poetry reveals a steady progression in the use of the lyric which illustrates a highly subjective, but confident, assertive and explicitly female poetic voice.

Mapping the Body in Metaphors of Landscape

It seems fitting that Levertov's poetry should provide the almost seamless link between the effect that landscape has upon the body and the mapping of the body in the language of landscape. Her poem, 'Zeroing In', from *Breathing the Water* (1988), demonstrates the very idea that the self is, indeed, a landscape. The poem conveys the dialogue between a man and a woman and intimates their mutual understanding of certain places that lie within themselves – within their landscapes – that have the potential, once touched, even if inadvertently, to cause immeasurable pain and damage. The poem begins with the male speaker, "'I am a landscape", he said,/ "a landscape and a person walking in that landscape."'”³¹⁵ Interestingly, we perceive how the male speaker demonstrates a split self

³¹⁵ Denise Levertov, 'Zeroing In', *Breathing the Water* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1988), p. 23.

composed of the landscape itself and an observer traversing that landscape. His female acquaintance agrees:

“I know”, she said. “When I set forth
to walk in myself, as it might be
on a fine afternoon, forgetting,
sooner or later I come to where sedge
and clumps of white flowers, rue perhaps,
mark the bogland, and I know
there are quagmires that can pull you
down, and sink you in bubbling mud.”

This extract beautifully demonstrates the unnerving potential of falling dangerously into oneself, into forbidden locations, that once disturbed, possess the capability to destroy the self entirely. Of course, we realise that Levertov uses natural imagery to mask the map of human sensibility. We understand, also, that the act of stepping into the pool of bubbling mud mirrors an element of experience which touches the innermost depths of human pain – the self is in danger of dissipating entirely. Levertov also addresses the notion that the self is vulnerable – much like a landscape – and that we all live everyday with the knowledge that there are dormant emotions within us that occasionally threaten to rear up and change our lives forever. As we have already witnessed with Levertov, the world and the people which inhabit it are vulnerable, transient and inseparable from the natural world.

Levertov uses another poem, ‘I learned that her name was Proverb’ to explore the relationship between the inner self as landscape and the act of meeting people throughout life who enrich our understanding of who we are. The poem needs to be read in its entirety to fully apprehend its message:

And the secret names
of all we meet who lead us deeper

into our labyrinth
of valleys and mountains, twisting valleys
and steeper mountains –
their hidden names are always
like Proverb, promises:
Rune, Omen, Fable, Parable,
those we meet for only
one crucial moment, gaze to gaze,
or for years know and don't recognize

but of whom later a word
sings back to us
as if from high among leaves,
still near but beyond sight

drawing us from tree to tree
towards the time and the unknown place
where we shall know
what it is to arrive.³¹⁶

Significantly, the hidden names that Levertov refers to are narratives that seek to prophesy or teach certain truths or beliefs. This suggests that the people we intersect with in life have the capacity to draw us deeper into our own landscapes and afford us a richer understanding of our sense of self. Levertov concludes that we ultimately reach a point at which we can say we know what it is to have experienced life, what it is to be a someone in this world. However, the spiritual undertones are impossible not to read as the arrival of death, 'the time and unknown place' heralding the impromptu entrance into heaven as the final comprehension of human experience. Characteristically, Levertov adopts a metaphysical stance – she cleanly penetrates the human psyche and articulates abstract thoughts such as existence and death and considers the impact these concepts have upon the bodily terrain. Yet she does so without the need to use a highly subjective voice that was preferred by

³¹⁶ Denise Levertov, 'I learned that her name was Proverb', *Breathing the Water* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1988), p. 50.

other poets of her generation. In the last interview she conducted, just two months before she died, Levertov admits that poetry often coined 'confessional' was something she was increasingly frustrated by:

I'm certainly very tired of the me, me, me kind of poem, the Sharon Olds "Find the dirt and dig it up" poem, which has influenced people to find gruesome episodes in their life, whether they actually happened or not. Back when Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton were the models for neophytes, you had to have spent some time in a mental hospital to qualify as a poet. Now you have to have been abused. I know perfectly well that lots of people really have been abused, but it's unfortunate to use the fact of abuse as the passport to being a poet. I'm certainly tired of that kind of egotism.³¹⁷

For Levertov, personal experiences and sensations are the seedlings of her poetry yet she deplores the overt outpourings of highly intimate details that identify the speaker as poet and victim. Her poetry is always exploratory and touches the depths of human emotion but does so with grace and humility.

In stark contrast to Levertov's distaste for poet/victims, Sylvia Plath charted the female body with the language of landscape in a very different and highly subjective manner. Along with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck, Sylvia Plath attended one of Robert Lowell's writing courses in Boston 1959 and was very much inspired by his conviction to present subjectivity in an authentic style.³¹⁸ Plath often writes on matters and events that affected her deeply and at times it is clear that these experiences left her emotionally bereft

³¹⁷ Levertov's Final Interview 'A Poet's Valediction' by Nicholas O'Connell, *At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers* (New York: University of Washington Press, 1998). This interview can also be accessed online: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g/_/levertov/levertov.htm [Accessed September 2005].

³¹⁸ See Edward Larrissy's essay on Sylvia Plath in *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 137-147. In this essay Larrissy condemns critics who show their prejudice for poets like Plath who deploy 'subjective emotionalism'.

and unable to find a resolution. She was also very skilled at projecting her body outward – of offering her reader the sense that it is there to be viewed panoramically. Edward Larrissy identifies this in *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Objects and Gender* (1990) in which he perceives how aware she was of ‘her sense of self as an object for the male’.³¹⁹ Furthermore, in offering her body to spectators she expresses what Larrissy calls a ‘schizoid detachment’ from the self. Whilst Levertov meditates intensely upon the conditions that affect the self and uses the idea of landscape to enhance this, Plath takes a different approach by becoming both landscape and observer of landscape. Her poem ‘Tulips’ written in March 1961, just weeks after she’d had an appendectomy and about a month after suffering a miscarriage, depicts the sensation of giving one’s self away to hospital staff. Like Stevenson’s poem about the stranger in a foreign place ‘emptying out her skin’ we envisage a similar concept developing in much of Plath’s poetry – detaching oneself from reality. This particular poem of Plath’s is also very reminiscent of the time she spent in the McLean Hospital in Massachusetts in 1953 after her suicide attempt and subsequent breakdown in the sense that it explains her loss of self once she has been institutionalised. ‘Tulips’ uses natural imagery to evoke the body as landscape and to emphasise how she both feels her own body being touched by others as well as simultaneously observing them doing so:

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage –
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;

³¹⁹ Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, p. 137.

Their smiles catch onto my skin, like smiling hooks.³²⁰

Plath likens the female body to a pebble and the nurses and surgeons as water smoothing over her. Her use of the pronoun 'I' denotes her penchant for displaying an interiority that is both unsettling and surprisingly stark in its lack of emotion; because the reader perceives the body as a landscape which is detached from the soul, or self, or indeed, the speaker of the poem, it is impossible to empathise fully with the trauma of losing oneself prior to surgery. Indeed, Plath's techniques demonstrate what Isobel Armstrong calls 'impersonal self-exposure'.³²¹ Her impersonality is apparent in the clarity and directness of her idiom; her imagistic tendencies are seen most obviously in her correlation between abstract concepts with concrete nouns, for example, she describes numbness as being brought to her with 'bright needles'.³²² As we have witnessed she is often detached from her poetry yet it is impossible not to read her poems autobiographically given that she was a poet who so viscerally responded to personal events and experiences; many of these events and experiences often correspond to entries she made in her personal journals or the prolific letters she sent to her mother, both of which were made public. Her life can be cross-referenced on so many counts that it is impossible not to view Plath's poetry as personal and intimate records, which, at times, make for uncomfortable reading. It is also easy to see why she is so often coined a confessional poet, in a derogatory manner, given her exploitation of the lyric to its full narcissistic potential.

³²⁰ Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips', *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 160.

³²¹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry: Poetics and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 367.

³²² Plath confessed in her journal that she was 'closest to Amy Lowell [influential member of imagist movement], in actuality.' This entry can be found in Karen V. Kukil (ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 88.

There are many poems by Plath that could specifically elucidate the thread in this chapter of body as landscape.³²³ However, her poem 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices' is a good example of the various ways in which female experience can be conveyed with the metaphors of landscape. It is a long poem but warrants extensive analysis for its rich imagery in terms of landscape and how this reflects the shifting emotions of the female self. As the title implies, the poem is a sequence of three monologues, each conveying a different perspective on motherhood and is set in a 'maternity ward and round about'. The first voice conveys the pain of childbirth and the overwhelming sensations of maternal love. The second voice speaks of the emotional pain of losing a baby and the prospect of infertility; whilst the third voice reveals the trauma and guilt of abandoning a baby. Strangely, the three voices could, in fact, be one consciousness, as the speaker conveys the emotional turbulence that is encountered by all mothers and prospective mothers and certainly all the emotions were unearthed by Plath at certain times in her short life. She often toyed with the difficulty of combining children with a writing career and in this sense she knew first-hand the pleasures, pains and frustrations of motherhood. At times, she perceives children as an intolerable bind on her writing and her identity as a woman, at other times she literally likens herself to a barren landscape without them: 'I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. I have turned from being an intellectual, a career women: all that is ash to me. And what do I meet in myself? Ash. Ash and more ash.'³²⁴ At various stages in her life, motherhood becomes the pinnacle of self and the concept of

³²³ I think mainly of Plath's poems 'Ariel', 'Purdah', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Paralytic' and 'Edge'. They also display the 'impersonal self-exposure' as expressed by Isobel Armstrong or the 'schizoid detachment' articulated by Edward Larrissy.

³²⁴ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, Karen V. Kukil (ed.), (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 500.

fertility is often interspersed with the idea of the body or the self as landscape, as with the symbol of ash which is clearly suggestive of death.

In 'Three Women' the language of landscape seeks to enhance the physical appearance and sensations of the body. The following examples illustrate how the speaker perceives the self in relation to landscape. The first voice conveys a macroscopic vision of the body: 'I am slow as the world. I am very patient,/ Turning through my time, the sun and stars/ Regarding me with attention.'³²⁵ The speaker illustrates the calm contemplation of the pregnant female self prior to the birth. She is as significant as the earth, the world, even, as if she is the most central component to the universe, the mere stars and sun regard her 'with attention'. And further in the poem, moments before the first stage of childbirth, she becomes the very image of fecundity: 'I am dumb and brown. I am a seed about to break. The brownness is my dead self, and it is sullen.'³²⁶ In the preceding moments before the birth, the first voice contemplates her self prior to her pregnancy – she perceives her former life as brown, dead, and sullen, as if her existence were meaningless without a child. And further in the poem, once the child is born, the speaker sees landscape in territorial terms as she asks, 'How long can I be a wall around my green property?' The image of the wall yields the notion of the mother as protector; clearly, the prospect is daunting yet the question is rhetorical. Significantly, the self as landscape splits as it becomes both mother and child, margin and centre. Yet they also share an inextricable bond; the wall shields yet also merges with the green land it protects.

³²⁵ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 72.

³²⁶ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', p. 179.

The second voice in the poem reveals a landscape that is reminiscent of a battle scene and typifies the vampiric feminine qualities that Plath is so adept at conveying: 'I am accused. I dream of massacres./ I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,/ Hating myself, hating and fearing.'³²⁷ Typically of Plath, she depicts her landscapes and moods in colour; the bloody landscape is a nightmarish cocktail of black and red which conveys vividly the sense of guilt over not being able to carry a baby to full-term. As a vampire, she 'drinks' the agonies within the body – drowning in her own grief. And further in the poem she becomes nothing more than a mere shadow, her emptiness profound: 'I shall move north. I shall move into a long blackness./ I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman.'³²⁸ For the first time, Plath's landscape becomes ungendered – 'neither man nor woman' – and demonstrates her sense of overwhelming loss of identity without the ability to conceive a child. The speaker understands the stigma of failing to produce a family, something more profoundly felt in the 1950s and 60s than in contemporary society, perhaps, and acknowledges her life as an outsider: 'I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.' This outer position is in stark contrast to the first voice who describes being at the 'center of an atrocity',³²⁹ the atrocity being the intensity of childbirth. For the second voice her landscape manifests enigmatically as shadows and borders and demonstrates a diminishing self.

³²⁷ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', pp. 180-181.

³²⁸ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 182.

³²⁹ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', p. 180.

The third voice has an entirely different landscape. Hers is the voice that articulates the abandonment of a child and depicts the physical appearance of her body in more literal terms: I am a mountain now, among mountainy women.'³³⁰ Her lofty position places her above the earth, yet we sense her discomfort within this elevated position which she reveals through her observations of the doctors that tend to her: 'They hug their flatness like a kind of health./ And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?/ They would go mad with it.'³³¹ She illustrates the shock and fear of an unexpected pregnancy. Later in the poem we see how the third voice perceives the separation of mother and baby as a ship leaving an island: 'She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,/ And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.'³³² The landscape for this particular dialogue is transient and shifting – sometimes above land, sometimes departing from it and also, as with the following example, the fabric of the earth itself as she becomes as 'solitary as grass. What is it I miss?/ Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?'³³³ In her contemplative state that encompasses both remorse and freedom, we see the speaker in isolation once again, as a solitary piece of grass. 'It is so beautiful', she exclaims, 'to have no attachments!' We understand how the changing landscape responds to the fluctuating emotions of giving birth and then leaving a child. As with life, what seems the right thing to do can carry with it the enormity of obligation and duty that cannot simply be relinquished with the absence of the problem.

³³⁰ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', p. 179.

³³¹ Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', p. 180.

³³² Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', p. 184.

³³³ Ibid.

The transient nature of Plath's bodily landscapes illustrates her ability to depict a collective female consciousness. Each of her women honours the ambiguity of *all* women, mothers or not, and the pressures and fears they harbour internally. Plath manages, in her most visceral manner, to adopt Kristeva's philosophy of being able 'to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.'³³⁴ Whilst she has often been derided for her intimate portrayals of female experience, which are often her own, she also explores with probing insight the authenticity of what it is to be female.

This chapter closes with a poem by Mina Loy called 'Parturition' which is noted by the editor of her posthumous collection *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* as being the first poem ever written on childbirth.³³⁵ Radical in itself, the poem further enhances the notion of the female self as being the very centre of her landscape; there is a sense of tremendous confidence in the presentation of a 'definite female "I."³³⁶ The female speaker in 'Parturition' does not skirt the periphery of existence but is the very core of existence: 'I am the centre / Of a circle of pain/ Exceeding its boundaries in every direction,'³³⁷ she asserts in the first lines of the poem. Moreover, descriptions of boundaries, contours and spaces enforce entirely the sense of the female self as a landscape. Indeed, it is impossible not to read her allusions to the geographical study of the earth as a personal exploration of a specifically female terrain, which men are biologically barred from comprehending. For

³³⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader: Second Edition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Books, 1997), p. 213.

³³⁵ Roger Conover (ed.) notes this in the appendices of Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), p. 177.

³³⁶ Mary E. Galvin, *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.57.

³³⁷ Mina Loy, 'Parturition', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 4.

Loy, the understanding that specifically female experience must be articulated through an equally specific self is a key element in her work. Expressing her own experience of childbirth was an important exploration in the context of the early twentieth century where readers of poetry were reluctant to hear of the bodily functions of such intimate female experiences. According to one of her contemporaries, Alfred Kreymborg, her subject matter was considered lewd even by American standards.³³⁸ Despite resistance to her work she believed strongly in presenting authentic experience and felt it her duty to convey this. After the birth of her first child, Oda, she was reported to have said: 'I am glad to introduce my sex to the hidden meaning of childbirth. The last illusion about my poor miscreated sex is gone. I am sad.'³³⁹ Loy was aware of the illusory expressions of womanhood as defined by patriarchy and was a passionate advocate of dispelling the truth. In 'Parturition', Loy exposes childbirth for all its pain and agony, yet also shows how women may obtain a position of power by spiritually surpassing the sensations:

I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony
 Incidentally with the exhaustion of control
 I reach the summit
 And gradually subside into anticipation of
 Repose
 Which never comes
 For another mountain is growing up
 Which goaded by the unavoidable
 I must traverse
 Traversing myself³⁴⁰

³³⁸ This is noted in Roger Conover's extensive appendices to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* which has useful anecdotes and critical analysis of her work by her contemporaries, pp. 188-189.

³³⁹ Roger Conover (ed.) in the introduction to Mina Loy's, *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), p.lxiv.

³⁴⁰ Mina Loy, 'Parturition', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p. 5.

She is both aware of climbing the mountain and of the mountain growing inside her; she is both explorer of landscape as well as the beginnings of the landscape itself. Her speaker illustrates an almost detached sense of rising above the pain as she traverses herself to achieve a higher state of consciousness - to flow across the body, the landscape, the pain distinct, yet detached. Her perspective is similar to that of Levertov as we perceive the speaker self-consciously trawling her own landscape, exploring what it is to be female. Female consciousness, for Loy, can be elevated as women look above and beyond themselves, not to men, but to their outer sensations and nerve-endings, to attain the highest form of control over pain.

This perspective contrasts with the view of Gilbert and Gubar, who claim that confinement is much like being trapped within a house or prison, or, in other words, to be denied the hope of spiritually transcending or escaping the body.³⁴¹ Loy clearly shows how she views childbirth as a spiritual and empowering experience as her speaker succeeds in 'unifying the positive and negative / poles of sensation' (lines 62-63). Loy implies that one must embrace, not resist, the rhythms of the body by uniting pain and pleasure, making them almost indistinguishable from one another: 'There is a climax in sensibility,' her speaker claims, 'When pain surpassing itself / Becomes Exotic' (lines 59-61). The 'exotic' state that Loy refers to, as the body literally transcends itself, is also reminiscent of Kristeva's parallel society or space of fantasy and pleasure. And typically, for a radically minded poet like Loy, the best way to present this alternative society is to vividly capture the very

³⁴¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), p.88.

rhythms and sensations of childbirth in the technical composition of her poem. The irregular stanzas are a mixture of long, lexically-technical sentences, contrasting with singular words that are pared down to their purest meaning. At the 'summit' the speaker's pain reaches its peak, before easing into an alliteratively softer sentence. The stream of words becomes sharper, clipped almost, as the contractions intensify yet lengthens and softens as they subside. Even the location of the white space on the page implies an unimaginable pain that cannot be put into words. Moreover, the presentation of the poem is much like a landscape: certain areas are mountainous, others out-of-bounds or volatile and uninhabitable. In fact, her poem 'Parturition', along with another of her poems 'Human Cylinders', expresses most profoundly the cyclical and rhythmical sensations of the body which are characterised by the ways in which she moulds the appearance and tempo of her sentences. Often, she presents the perfect example of how women writers convey 'meaning with their body,'³⁴² as hypothesised by French feminist Hélène Cixous in her influential essay, 'Sorties' (1975). It is clear to see that Loy most definitely writes the female body into the text and, in turn, sees her text, and thus her body, as a landscape. Language, the visual and aural actuality of it, is malleable enough to shape complex female experiences and captures perfectly the idea that the female self is in fact the very core of existence itself. Perhaps one of the most significant ideas that Loy's work reveals is one that is identified by Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers, who suggest that for women writers 'it was essential to present not what had happened to them, but what it was like *to be* them.'³⁴³ Loy

³⁴² Helene Cixous, 'Sorties' eds., Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.233.

³⁴³ Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), p.9.

illustrates her ability to show what being female was like, by introducing her readers to the authentic experience of the new woman via her inventive manipulation of poetic form.

Conclusion

The poems in this chapter have illustrated a marked development from a dislocated female self, often at odds with the landscape she inhabits, to a clear sense of the body marking the very centre of female experience. The opening poems, especially (Riding) Jackson's, often reveal a disembodied self in a strangely unfamiliar world. The resulting poem becomes a textual space which aims to merge the conflict between body and landscape. Often within the text, the poet can interrogate herself and ask where she has to be to feel like a someone in this world. Riding, Stevenson and occasionally Levertov, for example, continually question female identity in relation to their surroundings. Levertov, it must be said, often chooses not to write with a specifically female agenda. Her poems, as indicated in previous chapters, often tie together a range of experiences that are relevant to the human condition at large. In the latter half of the chapter, the poems imagine alternative realities and spaces or 'parallel societies' as Kristeva calls them in 'Women's Time'. The metaphors of landscape are increasingly used to suggest that the female body is under intense self-investigation. This is empowering, however, for it suggests that women are mapping, and thus articulating in the space of the poem, their own bodies rather than having them defined by others. The poems frequently explore the body in a voyeuristic manner, traversing their own landscape and conveying the taboo subjects of womanhood such as childbirth and unconventional maternal love. Ultimately, the female-centred experience of childbirth, as

identified by Loy, is the most revealing narrative for the speaker locates herself at the very centre of female experience. The contours of her body are clearly demarcated in the striking language of landscape. Once the self becomes the terrain to be traversed and explored, the female voice becomes authoritative, innovative and, at times, controversial. In this chapter we have witnessed the female form as it is wished to be seen by the female self. These female cartographies do not fulfil the role of muse or the observed as noted by a male observer. Rather, as a collective group, the poetry is a strident affirmation of female identity.

Chapter Seven

Myth: Healing the Rift of Exile

According to Michelle Banks, a scholar on myth-making and exile in the work of Canadian writer, George Elliott Clarke, creating new worlds or mythic communities can ‘heal the rift of exile.’³⁴⁴ This final chapter recognises the validity of Banks’ suggestion by arguing that the appropriation of imaginary realms of myth enables Anglo-American women poets to overcome their sense of otherness which is precipitated by their experiences of cultural duality and womanhood. As the previous chapters outlined, poems are important imaginative or representational spaces for women as they enable the stifling social orders which are embedded in material conditions to be unravelled and appropriated. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the dynamic nature of the poem space when it is inflected with myths and stories. Of course, myths and stories are already existing imaginative spaces which gesture toward a doubly creative arena. In Lefebvorean terms, myth as a space becomes the most imaginative form of mental space; a ‘representational space’ which challenges the status quo, the material conditions of society. Furthermore, when women utilise these representational spaces of myths and stories, their narratives become highly subjective and often convey narratives that could, indeed, be their own life stories. In most cases, the poems display an insistence on healing the rift of gendered displacement. Occasionally, however, poems focus upon re-imagining the shared condition of cultural disorientation. There is a strong legacy of feminist criticism that seeks to enhance the self-

³⁴⁴ Michelle Banks, ‘Myth-Making and Exile: The Desire for a Homeplace in George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*, *Canadian Poetry*, 2002, vol. 51, p. 67.

reflective potential of myth for women writers. Susan Sellers, for example, explains that: 'The recognition that the faces in mythology may be our own faces which we "must explore" to gain knowledge of myth's inner meanings and our own, has been crucial.'³⁴⁵ Sellers also conveys the idea that myths, in particular, are 'corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered.'³⁴⁶ The allure of expressing both the 'divine' and 'demonic' elements of their own experience of womanhood via the imaginary space of the poem is resonant of Kristeva's recurring evocation of the potential to explore 'the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.'³⁴⁷ Projecting oneself onto an imaginative text that predates the woman poet seems to indicate the comfort and appeal of drawing upon existing narratives and, paradoxically, suggests that they are perhaps more likely to be daring and intimate as a result. The mythical figure or narrative becomes acceptable for the very reason that it cannot be read solely as a personal narrative and enables a chink of distance between self and story. Contemporary poet Eva Salzman detects this potential too: 'Mythologised personae provide a stimulating get-out clause for the writer, permitting her to tackle from a different angle that which she was going to write about anyway, but with another kind of responsibility attached.'³⁴⁸ The essentially private, profound and even taboo nature of this selection of poetry illustrates the creative impulse to present the female self, and occasionally the shared human condition, in all its variables. As Diane Purkiss suggests

³⁴⁵ Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairytale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. vii.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. vii.

³⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi (ed.), (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 207.

³⁴⁸ Eva Salzman, 'Make Mine a Double', *PBS Bulletin*, Summer 2004, No. 201, p. 16.

women's use of myth is often perceived as simply a rewriting of negative narratives that perceive women badly into more positive ones. She claims it is the duty of feminists to challenge the male creators of myth; she writes that myths were 'invented by men earlier this century for reasons which had nothing to do with female empowerment.'³⁴⁹ This chapter is attentive to the idea that men poets have begun the narrative but women in the twentieth-century, in particular, are finding empowerment in a collective female consciousness.

Some of the themes that are examined in this chapter are betrayal, motherhood, creativity and female solidarity with the range of personae drawn upon includes figures such as Eurydice, Thetis, Persephone, Demeter, the Sibyl and the Goddess. The vast amount of material that was collated for this chapter was overwhelming. It became obvious that the poets' tendencies toward the appropriation of myth and stories offer the most prolific output of work above all the other chapters in this thesis. Again the chapter is ordered thematically with the first section of poetry pulled together under the title of classical mythology. H.D.'s poems predominate this section although it features alongside the poetry of Denise Levertov and Sylvia Plath. The next selection of poems focuses upon the Goddess and Sibyl as symbols of female empowerment. In this section, Ruth Fainlight, Levertov, Eva Salzman and Anne Stevenson each present powerful mythical narratives that subvert traditional feminine ideals of beauty, youth and power.

³⁴⁹ Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myths' in Carolyn Larrington ed., *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 442.

Classical Mythology

Modernist poet, H.D., draws more prolifically upon figures from Greek mythology to explore her creative impulse than any other of the women writers illustrated in this chapter. H.D.'s important mythic output characteristically intersects the beauty of the natural world with the very profound dilemmas that her numerous classical protagonists find themselves in. Feminist scholars have striven to connect H.D.'s portrayals of her Greek world with personal events that affected her in material conditions. Alicia Ostriker, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Stanford Friedman have all assessed the potential of utilising myth to mask poets' own intensely painful experiences. In the case of H.D. these experiences encompass her experiences of abortion, her lovers' infidelities and her subsequent feelings of desertion.³⁵⁰ Elizabeth Dodd also explains H.D.'s desire to find a common ground between herself and another female ally: '... the implication, however subtle, that *such as it was for her, so it still is for me* carries a greater moral weight of indictment than if a woman should write simply of her own unhappiness.'³⁵¹ Certainly, it would seem that H.D. finds some contentment and a space of refuge, perhaps, in aligning herself mainly (although not exclusively) with female protagonists whose plights were similar to her own. In her portrayal of the tragic tale of Eurydice, for example, H.D. especially draws upon very raw emotions and a strident voice to respond to Orpheus' lack of faith in his wife, as she begins her ascent with him out of Hades. This poem warrants specific feminist attention because of

³⁵⁰ Many scholars have offered readings on H.D.'s appropriation of myth; the most useful with regards to the idea of masking are as follows: Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), Alicia Ostriker's, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking' in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women Culture and Theory* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1986), and Rachel Blau DuPlessis', *H.D. The Career of that Struggle* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).

³⁵¹ Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop and Louise Glück*, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992, p. 23.

the focus on Eurydice rather than Orpheus, an act which Jane Dowson argues 'literally reverses the male gaze.'³⁵² Rather than being a poem that laments Orpheus' tragic struggle to win his wife back from Hades, H.D.'s 'Eurydice' foregrounds the juncture at which she is angered by his lack of faith in her enduring loyalty. This poem marks a crucial point as Orpheus gazes behind to check that Eurydice still follows him, even though he has been prevented from doing so as this will result in her banishment to the Underworld forever. Listen to the venom in which the speaker, Eurydice, spits out the words in the opening lines to the poem:

So you have swept me back,
I who could have walked with the live souls
above the earth,
I who could have slept among the live flowers
at last;

so for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I am swept back³⁵³

The distinction between the pronouns 'I' and 'you' and the echoing of the words 'swept back' seeks to heighten the physical as well as emotional divide between Eurydice and Orpheus. Furthermore, we witness, dubiously, that Eurydice's anger is not because of her yearning to share her life with her husband, but rather that she desires more than anything to live and sleep among the flowers and live souls on earth: she wants to make a sensual connection with the world she loves. This poem was published in H.D.'s *Collected Poems* (1925) and it is quite conceivable that this portrayal of betrayal coincides with certain

³⁵² Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 138.

³⁵³ H.D., 'Eurydice', *Collected Poems: 1912-1944* (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. 52.

events in her own life, particularly around 1915 when she and her husband, Richard Aldington, lost their only child. Not long after this traumatic event it is also thought that Aldington had an affair. Certainly, the anger and profound sense of loss is impossible to mask even within the imaginary space of the text, yet she is clearly empowered by the partial cover story as it allows her to articulate a range of intense emotions that would have felt especially raw at the time.

Interestingly, the intersection of two worlds in 'Eurydice' lends itself in part to H.D.'s own expatriate experience between America and England although that is certainly not the whole story in this poem and doesn't overshadow the feminist urgency. Yet, we can see the marked comparison between the Underworld and upper earth after Eurydice has made explicit her anger at losing her right to live a second time:

everything is lost,
everything is crossed with black,
black upon black,
and worse than black,
this colourless light.³⁵⁴

The blackness of her time in the Underworld contrasts greatly with her recollections of the earth which is beautifully expressed in the rich, jewel colours of the natural world:

if once I have breathed into myself
the very golden crocuses
and the red,
and the very golden hearts of the first saffron,
the whole of the golden mass,³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ H.D., 'Eurydice', p. 52.

³⁵⁵ H.D., 'Eurydice', p. 53.

Eurydice's loss is profound – even the words 'lost' and 'loss' are littered incessantly throughout the poem. Yet even though her sense of deprivation is vivid, Eurydice claims that her life with Hades will be more bearable than living on earth with a man who doubts her unfailing love. Purkiss takes this further by suggesting that Orpheus represents more than 'male-centredness, but the narcissistic base of male poetic mastery.'³⁵⁶ She draws upon the example where Orpheus turns to Eurydice to search for truth in her face: 'What was it you searched for in my face?' she asks.³⁵⁷ Purkiss focuses upon male poetic impotence and enlarges this theme, and yet H.D.'s Eurydice seems intent in her passionate outbursts which enhance her own power in contrast to Orpheus' loss or lack. Even in the darkest of places Eurydice becomes a formidable tower of strength: 'Against the black/ I have more fervour/ than you in all the splendour of that place', and again, 'I have the fervour of myself for a presence/ and my own spirit for a light'.³⁵⁸ Her loss of the earth she loves for a second time invokes a rage so intense that her displacement becomes both illuminating and liberating. She experiences what it feels like to be a woman once more, passionate, vibrant and alive. Again, Purkiss suggests that Eurydice 'can discover a selfhood which goes beyond [Orpheus]', but only at the cost of suffering.'³⁵⁹ The female self can be found and set free, it seems, even amidst the despair and chaos of the shifting environments from which she is wrenched. In this poem, it could be said that H.D. truly accomplishes Kristevaeen and Lefebvorean principles of crushing existing social orders and codes, even in the already imaginary space of an enduring myth where she is subordinated. Orpheus' steadfast

³⁵⁶ Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myths', p. 449.

³⁵⁷ H.D., 'Eurydice', p. 52.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 54-55.

³⁵⁹ Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myths', p. 449.

reputation in mythical chronologies is overturned and Eurydice is re-imagined and re-positioned in the foreground of the story as a strikingly strong protagonist – but also one who suffers – whose characteristics bear an uncanny resemblance to her author, H.D., the poet who championed her.

H.D.'s perspective on the Orpheus tale is from Eurydice's point of view, Levertov, however, illustrates it through dramatic monologue and the voice of a tree. According to mythological sources Orpheus was the supreme singer and musician of ancient Greece and had the ability to entrance the whole of nature with his music. Levertov's speaker assumes the role of one of the trees who is seduced by his song. The following example exemplifies the ways in which displacement is both anticipated and held in high esteem; the speaker addresses the ideas of one's roots being literally enriched with discourse as well as the notion that displacement extends deeper than roots:

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
 came into my roots
 out of the earth,
 into my bark
 out of the air,
 into the pores of my greenest shoots
 gently as dew
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
He told of journeys
 of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
 of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
deeper than roots ...³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ Denise Levertov, 'A Tree Telling of Orpheus', *Poems: 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), p. 81.

It is not simply Orpheus' singing that entrances the tree but the words that speak of unknown places and the journey experience. Orpheus renders stability unstable; even Levertov's typography is fractured – white space streaks across the page illuminating the tensions between one's roots and the excitement of the new, as if elastic is being pulled taut, waiting to be released. And release finally comes in the form of the literal uprooting of the tree later in the poem:

And I
 in terror
 but not in doubt of
 what I must do
in anguish, in haste,
 wrenched from the earth root after root,
the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder ---
and behind me the others: my brothers
forgotten since dawn. In the forest
they too had heard,
and were pulling their roots in pain
out of a thousand years' layers of dead leaves,
 rolling the rocks away,
 breaking themselves
 out of
 their depths.³⁶¹

Again, Levertov highlights with her fractured discourse and the appearance of her words on the page the very physical and visual act of displacement. Each line emulates the sensation of wrenching roots from the ground – tentative and fragmented at first as the speaker invokes uncertainty at how deeply embedded they are – and then, aware of the immense task at hand, the longer line lengths suggest a great stretching and heaving as the speaker seeks freedom from the earth. Displacement is painful but necessary for the speaker in the

³⁶¹ Denise Levertov, 'A Tree Telling of Orpheus', *Poems: 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), pp. 82-83.

poem and if it were ever possible to portray it visually Levetov has succeeded in doing so.

To return to H.D., she has an insistent preoccupation with the female protagonist whose plight might best offer a counter-argument to the patriarchal values that are debilitating to women. As Carolyn Larrington sets out in the preface to her edited collection of essays, *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (1992), 'Mythology, the study of myth, introduces us to new ways of looking at social structures, so that we can examine constants and variables in the organization of human society, in particular ... women's roles across different cultures and historical periods.'³⁶² Larrington's concern with new ways of looking at social structures bears all the hallmarks of Lefebvre's narratives of appropriating social space. Both see the very act of imagining fictional accounts as a way of offering an alternative viewpoint on the world we inhabit. For H.D., re-imagining the mythical account of the Greek courtesan, Lais, is a way of exposing some of the patriarchal beliefs that have sought to perpetuate the female beauty myth. Lais lived at the time of the Peloponnesian war and was widely thought of as the most beautiful woman of her generation by the suitors of Paphos. Although, her tale is not widely recognised in more recent mythological accounts, she is sometimes captured in epigrams as presenting her looking glass to Aphrodite. Ultimately, she is a symbol of female beauty which H.D. captures and subverts in her poem 'Lais'. In this poem we witness a feminist response to the complexity of female beauty primarily by lamenting the loss of sexuality and the inevitability of ageing. What the poem achieves by honing in upon the subversive nature of beautiful icons, is the

³⁶² Carolyn Larrington (ed.), *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. ix.

fickle and temporal nature of the male population. All too soon another beauty, another icon, will replace the one before and thus there begins an endless cycle of women's identities being elevated only to be shattered as they start to age. For H.D., this story would have struck a chord perhaps with her own personal situation – she wrote this poem some years after the trauma of Aldington's infidelities had embedded themselves in her consciousness. She would have known what it was to feel loss, humiliation and the consequences of these states of being: invisibility, unattractiveness, loneliness and impending mortality. This poem expresses with some stridence the decline of woman as a male-constructed image. As Lais' beauty disintegrates, or more to the point, as the male population of Paphos finds another younger and more beautiful muse, we see her finding strength in abandoning her mirror:

Lais has left her mirror,
for she weeps no longer,
finding in its depth,
a face, but other
than dark flame and white
feature of perfect marble.³⁶³

Lais no longer cries for her loss – the mirror, it seems, has become a metaphor for Paphos and male authority. She no longer looks within its depths because it does not project back the image that she has been told is the epitome of female beauty. In the absence of Lais' mirror, H.D. implies that she is free to construct her own identity. From a feminist viewpoint, the image of 'otherness' can be liberating and certainly embraces Kristeva's notion of exploring the unknown and imaginary realms in order to express the essence – the

³⁶³ H.D., 'Lais' in *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, Louis L. Martz ed. (New Directions: New York, 1983), p. 149.

joys, shames, hatreds – of what it means to be a woman finding a way out of an overbearing value system that demands perfection.

As well as depicting the fervour of betrayal and the complexity of the female beauty myth, H.D. is just as passionate in her portrayals of motherhood. Again, this is another theme that H.D. experienced personally and from a variety of angles; in the birth of her stillborn daughter with Aldington in 1915, the birth of her daughter, Perdita Francis in 1919, and much later, an abortion in 1928. Her rather painful connections with childbearing and motherhood may have provided the stimuli for her appropriation of mythical stories that resonate with her own conditions. Her alignment with Thetis – the sea-goddess who was forced to abandon her son by her angered husband, Peleus, due to her loving but naïve attempt to make him immortal – seems to be an insistent and engaging narrative for H.D. Interestingly, Thetis is the only mythical figure she chooses to explore further in a second poem; the first piece, titled ‘Thetis’, forms part of her *Hymen* collection (1921), and the other (also of the same title) features in her *Heliodora* collection which she completed several years later in 1924. Both poems are significant pieces of work and when read alongside one another they illuminate the differences between Thetis’ life in the sea before having a child and also her perceptions of her environment after she has been banished from ever seeing her son again. The first poem concentrates on Thetis’ utter joy at exploring her home under the sea. The rich imagery captures the opulence and grandeur of this beautiful home as well as Thetis’ tireless pleasure inhabiting it:

Should the sun press
too heavy a crown,
should dawn cast

over-much loveliness,
should you tire as you laugh,
running from wave to wave-crest,
gathering the sea-flower to your breast,
you may dive down
to the uttermost sea depth,³⁶⁴

H.D.'s speaker conveys the very sensual pleasure of her surroundings, a space and moment in time that is pressed with innocence and freedom. We see that the only potential constraints are the intensity of the sun or the ache of too much laughter. Yet H.D.'s second account of Thetis refers to the period after she has abandoned her son, Achilles. It is his intense anger that forces Thetis into exile away from earth – she returns to her home in the sea with the other Nereids. After much reading of H.D.'s poetry, I find that her narratives command much respect for the way they deal with the painful experience of the loss of a child. The pain of this experience, rather than being projected squarely into the foreground, is made implicit and instead the seascape is contrasted before her life on earth and after. The first example shows that her place of birth is truly lovely to her. Yet, as time progresses, and Thetis is banished from her motherly role on earth, her original home becomes a place of entrapment:

I flung myself, an arrow's flight,
straight upward
through the blue of night
that was my palace wall,³⁶⁵

Although H.D. does not make explicit the connection between motherhood and her environment, we can see that in her second poem 'Thetis' there are restrictions and boundaries – her banishment is highlighted within the very place she once loved. We are

³⁶⁴ H.D., 'Thetis', *Collected Poems*, p. 118.

³⁶⁵ H.D., 'Thetis', *Collected Poems*, p. 162.

told of the palace walls that not only seek to keep her within them but also outside her place on earth. The expression of Thetis' maternal stirrings are perhaps most profound in the haunting song that forms the framework of the poem: '*Who dreams, who sings of a son?/ I, Thetis alone.*'³⁶⁶ The song itself is chilling and its insistent repetition of 'who dreams of a son' is an enchanting technique that conceals Thetis' pain in the form of dream as much as it reveals it through the articulation of longing. The following example illustrates how the very small everyday motion of trying on a necklace can exacerbate the sense that all is not quite right:

When I had finished my song,
and dropped the last seed-pearl,
and flung the necklet
about my throat
and found it none too bright,
not bright enough nor pale
enough, not like the moon that creeps
beneath the sea,
between the lift of crest and crest,
had tried it on
and found it not
quite fair enough
to fill the night
of my blue folds of bluest dress
with moon for light,³⁶⁷

The example contrasts greatly with the extract from the first poem – the seascape and its natural treasures do not seem to reflect the complete sense of self that it did before. The dominance of the sun in the first poem is replaced with the presence of the moon; we sense that Thetis lives perpetually in the dark in the second poem. Furthermore, the self, imagined through the symbol of a necklace, is utterly disorientated, 'not bright enough nor pale/

³⁶⁶ H.D., 'Thetis', p. 161.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

enough.' Maternal longing is intrinsically reflected in the contrasting environments and certainly mirrors H.D.'s own life with her experience of motherly loss and her own cultural transplantation. Although this poem is less defiant in a feminist sense, it is nonetheless, very poignant when read in the context of H.D.'s own life. Moreover, within a spatial context, the imaginative space of the poem and the existing myth of Thetis, provides the perfect vehicle from which this very sad sequence of emotions can unfold. Ultimately, it is impossible to conclusively connect these events with H.D., however, it is also entirely plausible that she would have felt a profound connection with her chosen mythical figures.

H.D. vividly conveys the anguish of a lost child in her poem 'Demeter' which features in her *Hymen* collection (1921). It is at this point in her career that Martz claims H.D. was in her 'borderline state: between old values and new, between old loves and new, between physical passion and poetical dedication.'³⁶⁸ It seems fitting then, that H.D., a borderline poet, should utilise the discourse of the imaginary realm to identify with Demeter, the mother of Persephone, who searches the world looking for her beloved daughter who was kidnapped and married by Hades, king of the underworld. Again, in H.D.'s rather evasive style, the pain of loss in this poem is intensified further by the fact that the speaker, Demeter, never explicitly mentions her daughter – rather, she empathises with another 'lost' child in ancient Greece, Dionysus: 'the child of my heart and spirit,/ is the child the gods desert/ alike and the mother in death.'³⁶⁹ Also, angry at Hades for taking her daughter from her, the speaker accentuates the discord between the love given and taken by both

³⁶⁸ Louis L. Martz in the introduction to H.D.'s *Collected Poems: 1912-1944* (New York: New Directions, 1986), p. xxii.

³⁶⁹ H.D., 'Demeter', *Collected Poems*, p. 114.

herself and her rival for her daughter's attention through natural imagery and the symbolic image of hands. The following example seems to elucidate how Demeter recounts her all-consuming motherly passion in a dramatic monologue as if speaking to her lost daughter, how she wants to be everything to her all at once even in her absence:

Sleep on the stones of Delphi –
dare the ledges of Pallas
but keep me foremost,
keep me before you, after you, with you,
never forget when you start
for the Delphic precipice,
never forget when you seek Pallas
and meet in thought
yourself drawn out from yourself
like the holy serpent,
never forget
in thought or mysterious trance –
I am greatest and least.³⁷⁰

The distance between mother and daughter and the displacement this evokes elicits a frantic and unrealistic request to be everywhere and everything at once, to believe that one can permeate another's thoughts on this level seems to be a cathartic form of recovery. And indeed, the poem is a destructive account of two subjects fighting for ownership over another person – a tug of war between mother and lover. Furthermore, the image of hands and limbs that infiltrates the poem illustrates the intense struggle between taking and searching: 'Soft are the hands of Love,/ but what soft hands/ clutched at the thorny ground,'³⁷¹ and, 'Ah, strong were his arms to wrest/ slight limbs from the beautiful earth,'.³⁷² The representation of hands as a means to control and claim ownership highlights the damaging effects of possessive love, something both mothers and lovers are often guilty

³⁷⁰ H.D., 'Demeter', p. 112.

³⁷¹ H.D., 'Demeter', p. 113.

³⁷² H.D., 'Demeter', p. 115.

of to a degree. The figure of Hades, as with the poem about Eurydice, is a significant patriarchal protagonist that evokes intense female emotions of betrayal and loss. Similarly, Hades as a mythical figure, might resemble any number of the men and women H.D. was loved and hurt by in her own life.

Sylvia Plath also offers a take on the classical myth of Persephone as the lost daughter in her poem, 'Two Sisters of Persephone', yet unlike H.D. she retells the sense of duality experienced by Persephone from the point of view of an anonymous speaker. Significantly, Plath wrote this poem in 1956, a year in which she travelled and studied extensively as well as her marriage to the poet, Ted Hughes. For Plath to identify with a character who, like herself, experienced the disorientating sensation of cultural duality most intensely at this point in her life is hardly surprising. Moreover, Plath speaks from the point of view of Persephone, the daughter who has lost her mother. Certainly Plath missed her own mother tremendously whilst living in England, even though she was ecstatically happy with Hughes at this time, as her letters home reflect: 'We both love you: can't wait to share our life and times with you in America.'³⁷³ In her mytho-poem, Plath chooses to express Persephone's loss as a self that is literally split in two – she even goes as far in her title to say that Persephone is indeed two people, two sisters. The first sister represents the barrenness of winter and reflects the element of Persephone's life as Hades' wife in the Underworld:

In her dark wainscoted room
The first works problems on
A mathematical machine.

³⁷³ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 271.

Dry ticks mark time

As she calculates each sum.³⁷⁴

We can see how Plath utilizes the textual space of myth to accentuate the suspension of time whilst Persephone and Demeter are apart. The winter is problematic and imagined as being a 'mathematical' world – perhaps complex for Plath the poet too, being a woman who loved words as opposed to numbers. The cold British winters were also problematic for Plath in her own life; often she would complain of the depressive nature of the English weather: 'Honestly, the reason I have been so slow in writing is that I have said to myself, "I will write tomorrow; then it is sure to be a sunny day and how cheerful I will be." Believe it or not, we haven't seen the sun for three weeks ... it is supposed to have been the coldest March in over 70 years.'³⁷⁵ As an individual, Plath was a highly sensitive poet who responds sensually to the world around her. As such, in this poem she contrasts Persephone's sense of bleakness with the warmth and brightness of her life on earth with her mother during the spring and summer months: 'Bronzed as earth, the second lies,/ Hearing ticks blown gold/ Like pollen on bright air.'³⁷⁶ Persephone is literally represented as a split self – divided by two different worlds and by love and loss for her mother. Plath presents the underworld as being dry, barren, time too seems endless. Earth, on the other hand, is fertile, rich and opulent, and like H.D.'s poetry is vividly recalled through colour imagery. Ultimately, this is a poem about fertility and barrenness, of life and death, of love and loss. Plath illustrates, by drawing upon Persephone as a displaced mythical figure, how the two selves living as they do in two different landscapes. As mothers, both Plath and

³⁷⁴ Sylvia Plath, 'Two Sisters of Persephone', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 31.

³⁷⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 451.

³⁷⁶ Sylvia Plath, 'Two Sisters of Persephone', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 32.

H.D. are able to empathise with both Demeter and Persephone as figures experiencing first and foremost maternal displacement. They also both invest a great deal of sensitive personal detail into their poetry, most likely both poets find the mythical cover a suitable one for depths of such intensity.

Sibyls and Goddesses

As we have seen, mytho-feminist icons, such as Eurydice, Thetis and Demeter, are often useful identities for women poets to assume in order to write obliquely about their own personal experiences. At other times, mythological characters become useful ammunition for declaring an imaginative war on patriarchal values and the poet becomes less prominent. Of course, there is always evidence of a strong feminist and female preoccupation but without the sense that the imaginative space of the poem is enabling the poet to heal very personal wounds, as with H.D., for example. Ruth Fainlight, Denise Levertov, Anne Stevenson and Eva Salzman are all keen to draw upon the ancient figures of Sibyls and Goddesses as emblems of female power in order to weave a mythological picture that places women in the foreground, or questions patriarchal authority. Traditionally, the Sibyl has been defined as an 'inspired prophetess' and has typically travelled throughout space and time.³⁷⁷ Marina Warner speaks of the transcendental nature of the Sibyl and her visionary capability of crossing cultural/historical boundaries:

The Sibyl, as a cross-cultural symbol, necessarily denies historical difference; her words, originating in the past, apply to the rolling present whenever it occurs; however, the perceived fact of her roots in that distant past adds weight to her message precisely because it is free of the historical

³⁷⁷ Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 355.

context in which she uttered it; she was not fettered by her historical time and place but could transcend it with her visionary gifts.³⁷⁸

Warner suggests a certain prophetic freedom in the sibyl's cross-cultural status. Fainlight's collection, *Sibyls and Others* (1980), reflects the transcendental nature of the Sibyl in her sequence of twenty-six poems that tell of her in various different locations and in different stages of her emotional development. The first poem in the sequence, 'A Sibyl', shows the positive elements of embracing something like home even though her powers don't allow her a historical grounding. Her speaker asserts an authoritative female voice; the sibyl, confident in her ability to prophesise, 'seems relaxed/ and calm, turning the leaves of her book,'³⁷⁹ and claims that her 'cave familiar as a nest' is her home – at last she has some stability and is 'no longer forced to make a choice between two worlds.' This is pertinent in that the sibyl is confident that her visionary talents have earned the right to a safe and secure home where she can ground herself. Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar speak of the metaphorical importance of the sibyl's cave which they claim is in fact 'a female space and it belonged to a female hierophant, the lost Sibyl.'³⁸⁰ They explain the relevance of the cave which they claim is the 'cavern' of the woman poet's 'own mind', whilst the sibylline leaves symbolizing a female subjectivity. Fainlight illuminates how rootlessness can be unsettling and depicts homemaking as being both welcome to her as well as evoking maternal instincts. We perceive how a home with roots allows her the self-confidence to proffer her visions of the future. Gleaning from ancient Sibylline legends a female territory

³⁷⁸ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairytales and their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. 71.

³⁷⁹ Ruth Fainlight, 'A Sibyl', *Selected Poems* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 73.

³⁸⁰ Sandra Gilbert and Susan M. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 97.

enables Fainlight to establish an imaginary home for herself within the textual space of the poem. The cave and its procreative connotations have resonances of Kristeva's call for a symbolic space that enables creative women to imagine and exert the power they often find quashed in the reality of material conditions.

The Sibyl becomes a really useful figure for elevating female authority. Because of her fantastic visionary powers Fainlight focuses upon these throughout her sequence of Sibyl poems. It is hard not to read this poem for autobiographical detail given Fainlight's own Jewish background:

I who was driven mad and cast out
from the high walls of Syrian Babylon
I who announced the fire of God's anger
who prophesy to those about to die
divine riddles
am still God's oracle.³⁸¹

Fainlight claims that she inherited a sense of rootlessness due to her mother's 'transplantation and having to learn a new language.'³⁸² She also maintains that her Jewish heritage and her own lack of loyalty to her roots is often a source of great regret to her which she expresses in her poem, 'The English Country Cottage' (outlined in Chapter Three). With these obvious Jewish preoccupations in her own life, Fainlight seems to empathise with the experience of exile. In 'The Hebrew Sibyl' her speaker declares: 'I who was driven mad and cast out/ from the high walls of Syrian Babylon.' Fainlight's pronoun in this sense is rather telling (most of the other sibyl poems are written in the third person) as it offers her a mouthpiece to speak for all those exiled in history. What is also made clear

³⁸¹ Ruth Fainlight, 'The Hebrew Sibyl', *Selected Poems* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 80.

³⁸² Interview with Ruth Fainlight – 21st April 2004.

in this poem is that the sibyl's prophetic powers are as much a burden as they are a gift and only seek to heighten the sensation of displacement:

But when all has taken place
when the walls collapse and the Tower crumbles –
that coming time, when knowledge is lost
and men no longer understand each other –
no one will call me insane
but God's great sibyl.³⁸³

Clearly, the sibyl's power over men is supreme – her gift of making confused and nervous heroes of ancient Greece and Rome. The Hebrew sibyl also conveys one of the biggest ironies of her power; when she prophesies the most awful endings and a population renders them incomprehensible, her only compensation is that she will be remembered as 'God's great Sibyl.' The Sibylline powers are a common theme in Fainlight's poetic sequence. Another poem illustrates the elevated status of the sibyl figure: 'The Cimmerian Sibyl' outlines how another of her clients 'slides under my skin'³⁸⁴ after which she questions 'Does god or sibyl then pronounce?' (line 25). Again, we witness how Fainlight often positions her Sibyls in direct opposition to, or on an equal standing with, God.

More often than not, the Sibyl's powers are illustrated as a positive affirmation of female identity. Fainlight stresses the deepest possible pleasures of having visionary powers in 'Introspection of a Sibyl':

Deeper than fear, I've learned, lies the greatest pleasure:
nausea and exhilaration of plummeting free,
the glee of surrender to nullity,
temptation more primal

³⁸³ Ruth Fainlight, 'The Hebrew Sibyl', *Selected Poems*, p. 80.

³⁸⁴ Ruth Fainlight, 'The Cimmerian Sibyl', *Selected Poems*, p. 86.

than any craving for security.³⁸⁵
The powers of the sibyl are bitter sweet. The speaker talks of the freedom that is evoked by the act of prophesising when it is possible to plummet free searching for knowledge and truths. Yet she also admits, frustratingly, that she has 'no command over your life' (line 57). Despite this, the sibyl is respected and placed as a pinnacle of female authority: 'and how lucky / if rather than burning or stoning, they protect you, ... / and call you sibyl.' (lines 61-65). The sibyl's protection throughout history has given her the special type of status usually only reserved for gods, saints and martyrs. As a literary symbol she has been an enduring figure of female authority.

The Goddess is another symbol of female supremacy and a figure that has captivated male and female poets. Rosemary Ellen Guiley writes extensively on the relationship between the Goddess and Witchcraft in her essay 'Witchcraft as Goddess Worship' and offers a useful description of the three elements of the Goddess:

Above all, Goddess is seen as the Triple Goddess with the three aspects of virgin, mother and crone. These aspects, the three phases of womanhood, are in turn related to phases of the moon, with which Goddess is identified. The virgin, or new moon, is Artemis/Diana, the huntress, the wild and free young woman who belongs to no man. The mother, or full moon, is the matron, the nurturer at her peak of fecundity and sexuality; she is Selene, Demeter, Ishtar, Isis, Queen Maeve. The crone, or waning and dark moon, is the old woman past menopause, the hag, the Wise Woman, the keeper of the mysteries of death, the destroyer to whom all life must return in death. In this aspect, she is frequently represented as Hecate, a triple goddess in herself, and sometimes as Kali.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Ruth Fainlight, 'Introspection of a Sibyl', *Selected Poems*, p. 106.

³⁸⁶ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, 'Witchcraft as Goddess Worship' in Carolynne Larrington (ed.), *The Woman's Companion to Mythology* (Pandora: London, 1997), p. 417.

The Goddess as a symbol encompasses all aspects of womanhood, with each facet of her personality representing a different phase in each woman's life. Despite the transient and therefore, realistic image of the Goddess symbol, the following poems are often oblique and ambiguous in their response to it. Levertov's poem 'The Goddess' reveals an aggressive encounter between a Goddess and a female speaker placed at her mercy. The physical strength of the Goddess alludes to empowerment yet is seen in negative terms, as the following example shows:

She in whose lipservice
I passed my time,
whose name I knew but not her face
came to me as I lay in Lie Castle!³⁸⁷

The term 'lipservice' is suggestive of a figure whose life is fundamentally built upon untruths. This is accentuated further in the name of her abode: 'Lie Castle'. The poem then proceeds to detail the physical encounter in which the Goddess throws the speaker against the castle walls. This act of violence is emblematic of something exciting although this is not made explicit:

There in cold air
lying still where her hand had thrown me,
I tasted the mud that splattered my lips:
the seeds of a forest were in it,
asleep and growing! I
tasted her power!
(lines 12-17)

Despite the cruel punishment, there is a sense of anticipation enhanced by the child-like observations of the seed 'asleep and growing' and the use of exclamation marks. The

³⁸⁷ Denise Levertov, 'The Goddess', *Collected Earlier Poems: 1940-1960* (New York: New Directions, 1979), p. 111, lines 1-4.

mouth, as a symbol of received language, is shown to taste the Goddesses power and to bite on the seed which 'spoke on my tongue / of day that shone already among stars' (lines 21-22). The poem gestures towards the transfer of female knowledge and power, despite the validity of the knowledge itself being dubious, which we saw in the poem's opening lines. Yet, Levertov acknowledges the power of the Goddess even though she is ambiguous about her motivations. In this poem she is a dominant role-model but not entirely one that is always honest to women – her message is oblique.

Eva Salzman writes a poem that seems to convey scepticism towards the symbol of the Goddess. In her poem entitled, 'Narcissus Reflects' she writes from the male perspective of Narcissus, which suggests in itself that a woman will never quite be good enough, but the message she is trying to engender is interesting. Her sardonic tone suggests that Goddesses, rather than being strong iconic figures of power, are instead, women with oddities and flaws and are remembered for these rather than for their positive attributes:

I've been through so many Goddesses.
I've searched everywhere.
I've searched high, I've searched low.
Can I find them? No!
Just fatal flaws and oddnesses.³⁸⁸

The poem conveys how Eurydice 'moped in the dark' (line 8) and how Thetis has 'lovely long wavy hair... / that was under her arms' (lines 11-12). Salzman seems to convey the subversive aspects of utilising myth. Within the space of her poem she seems to condemn the patriarchal positioning of women who are remembered for their flaws. Yet she is

³⁸⁸ Eva Salzman, *Double Crossing: New and Selected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 74.

captivated by these women too. In a recent article she too articulates the appeal of telling the stories of mythical women:

The muses I introduced in *Bargain with the Watchman* persistently tug at my skirts, and I'm not shooing them away just yet, as long as I worship at their church of irreverence. I suspect this will be a life-long creed. Mythologised personae provide a stimulating get-out clause for the writer, permitting her to tackle from a different angle that which she was going to write about anyway, but with another kind of responsibility attached.³⁸⁹

Salzman's sense of responsibility and belief that female icons are misrepresented and abandoned in mythic narratives is a thread that runs through her poetry.³⁹⁰ Within the space of the poem, Salzman is not so much concerned with the re-writing of myths and re-positioning or re-imagining female mythic figures, rather than with offering a critique on why it is so necessary to do so. In her poem 'Apocrypha', Salzman speaks of the ways in which mythical female personae have been forgotten. In Greek, the term 'Apocrypha' means 'those that have been hidden away' which suggests the primary motive behind this poem. She tells the story of a female icon who dies after losing her footing on the rocks as she scrambles out of the sea. The speaker suggests that she was probably pushed back in: 'Hands has already erased the shoulders.'³⁹¹ This description of the disappearance of an unnamed female relates to the idea that women have been forgotten in numerous historical narratives in much the same way. Salzman's final lines are purposeful in their intent to honour and articulate the story of these 'missing' women: 'It has long been our custom to disappear in this way, / with a careless spirit, the cables slackened then cut' (lines 13-14).

³⁸⁹ Eva Salzman, 'Make Mine a Double', *PBS Bulletin*, Summer 2004, No. 201, p. 16.

³⁹⁰ Another interesting poem by Salzman that addresses similar concerns is 'Mneme Re-writes History', *Double Crossing: Selected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 58. The opening lines read 'I'm so damn tired of love for the dead, / of the lies of the living about their dead.' Salzman implies that looking to iconic figures from the past is pointless seeing as it is a narrative or script that has been altered in any case.

³⁹¹ Eva Salzman, 'Apocrypha' in *Double Crossing: Selected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 154.

Stevenson shows the same disgruntlement with patriarchal dominance in terms of mythical appropriations. She addresses her poem 'Why Take Against Mythology (2)' to her lover. She asks: 'Why, love, do you persist / in personifying natural events? / That's not imagination, it's arrogance.'³⁹² Stevenson's poem also seems to offer a critique of the patriarchal narratives that define our present reality. She claims it is not imagination to do this but arrogance as man, drawing upon events in the natural world, reflects back a story that reifies male responses to the world they live in. She concludes that 'daft mankind' should stop 'conjuring out of mass and force / false spirit-shadows of his own mind' (lines 22-24). Stevenson, like Salzman, is aware of the potentially damaging aspects of appropriating myth and is largely aware that patriarchy is responsible for much of the re-telling. However, it is within the space of the poem that this discord can be harmonised; a previously silenced female voice is largely able to find empowerment in these poetic spaces.

Conclusion

This body of poetry has elucidated a strong sense of female empowerment at play within the space of the text. Myth is compelling for these poets, both as a vehicle for healing the displacement felt as a cultural outsider and as a woman, but also for channelling their scepticism towards the patriarchal manipulation of the genre. Echoing the words of W.H. Auden, contemporary poet, Anne Rouse, defines the allure of the 'myth kitty' as being the

³⁹² Anne Stevenson, 'Why Take Against Mythology (2)' in *Poems: 1955-2005* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 79.

‘collective dreaming which every poet taps into.’ Furthermore, she claims that this essentially ‘starts as a private musing, when you are alone as anyone could be, and if you’re very lucky, finally emerges as a public poem with its own life. It mirrors our own gestation as human beings.’³⁹³ This sense of ‘collective dreaming’ is a powerful tool which has been threaded through all the chapters but culminates in this exploration of myth as being the space where some of the most intimate insights of womanhood are revealed. This outpouring of emotion is perhaps compounded by the paradox of utilising a genre that can both represent a fictional character as well as mirror the personal experiences of the poet.

³⁹³ Interview with Anne Rouse conducted by Melanie Petch in February 2006.

Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth century the incessant desire to nudge writers of dual nationality into distinct literary nationalisms has perpetuated a longstanding misrepresentation of Anglo-American poets. A silent neglect by either Britain or America of the other's poetries have pervaded both literary traditions in the past and, at best, have ensured that Anglo-American poetry written over the past one hundred years or so isn't given the transatlantic hearing that it deserves. At a time when British editors are all too willing to embrace minority voices, why do they seem to have such a problem with embracing a native-American poet? Are they not minority enough? And in the multi-cultural climate that embodies American life why does it seem as if American editors and publishers have stopped reading and publishing British poetry as if it doesn't exist? Amidst what can only be described as a transatlantic aversion publishers and editors risk excluding really good poets that simply seek a literary arena in which they may be read fairly and openly. Above all, this thesis has called for an Anglo-American framework in order to provide a vital literary space that seeks to traverse the two traditions.

In this thesis, I have also suggested that the multiple poetic practices that these Anglo-American women poets adopt in their writing necessitate a liberal approach to their eventual positioning within literary canons. Ultimately, it was my intention to dismantle crude binaries based upon form and idiom and to paint a picture of both interconnectedness and separateness in terms of nationhood. The poets themselves are also willing to evade the

limitations of existing narratives that seek to restrain their innovative creativity. In a recent interview, poet Eva Salzman declared: 'Maybe one of the hallmarks in my work is a mid-Atlantic suspension. Or Nowheresville.'³⁹⁴ Her response conjures up the liberating concept of an imaginative and literary space that transcends the boundaries of national and cultural persuasion; a space that hovers freely somewhere – or nowhere – between America and Britain. This desire to be both creatively and nationally liberated is echoed in the words of another Anglo-American poet. W.H. Auden also sought to free himself from stifling national limitations. In a letter to a friend in Britain he wrote that he sought 'to live deliberately without roots.'³⁹⁵ Auden's desire for creative freedom suggests that he was happier living on the margins, in the indefinable areas that were patchier, less-concrete, and more complex perhaps. In response to these issues, this research has set up a critical climate in which poets who are highly individual in terms of their poetic techniques can be read for more oblique yet dynamised connections in their work.

Without doubt, the interplay between gender and cultural duality has also precipitated a creative energy that has been compelling. Both issues are often narrated in terms of displacement and when I first began this research, I also expected to find the condition of the outsider largely envisaged in negative terms. Yet the poems have conveyed a positive dynamic where cultural duality and gender are often richly and intricately interconnected.

³⁹⁴ Eva Salzman speaking in an interview conducted by Lidia Vianu on January 28th 2003. Salzman's response to Vianu's question begins with the following: 'That's one of those questions which others can answer. I'd prefer not to. Often enough, I've heard editors or writers comment about writing in an "American" way, but they never really explain what they mean. Another handy-pigeonholing I suspect. They don't want to explain it. Probably they can't ...' Salzman identifies the limitations for a writer of being identified solely in national/cultural terms.

³⁹⁵ This quotation was taken from an essay by Nicholas Jenkins titled 'Writing "Without Roots": Auden, Eliot and Post-national Poetry', in Steve Clark and Mark Ford (eds.), *Something We Have That They Don't: British and American Poetic Relations Since 1925* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 76.

A poet like Mina Loy has shown that her radical poetics are enlivened by her feminist impetus as well as by her admiration for the idiom of her American adopted land. For Denise Levertov, on the other hand, her innovative stylistics are driven by her innate desire to express the human condition organically. Anne Stevenson and Laura Riding, always more dubious of seeing themselves as women poets, show an obvious concern with female preoccupations such as the home, beauty and marriage. This thesis has sought to raise awareness of the much needed feminist narratives in response to nation, culture and dual-nationality.

The dynamised interchange between gender and cultural duality has produced layers of spatial preoccupations which have been developed throughout the course of this study. Despite the limitations of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theories in relation to women, his work has offered a useful critical vocabulary with which to define the imaginative potential of the poem. The theoretical alignment of Kristeva with Lefebvre, however, has suggested that the parallel world that can be inhabited within text is as much driven by the need to escape the status quo as it is for the need to find a female space. The one connection all the poets have made is the way that space is expressed. A range of literary symbols have been used to suggest the ways in which women are consolidating their sense of being in the world and healing any sense of discord. In Chapter Three we witnessed how maternal symbols often tie women to the nations they oscillate between. Chapter Four illustrated the significance of the domestic symbols which often became obstacles for both men and women to overcome. Loy is particularly adept at conveying a domestic cartography: her domestic spaces are divided by doors, windows, glass and curtains and are often marked by light and dark. In

deploying these techniques Loy manages to articulate the stark difference in the way male and female inhabit space. The chapter on journey spaces uses similar symbols of windscreens, mirrors and windows to suggest a space of self-reflection. Chapter Six also examines the use of territorial symbols. Female bodies are either articulated in terms of female displacement in relation to the landscape or they are radically re-aligned as being at the very centre of human existence. The final chapter on myth perceives how ancient female icons are often expressed as being preoccupied with the crossing of borders. Eurydice, Thetis, Demeter and Persephone were all seen to be physically traversing borders as well as experiencing often painful experiences of womanhood such as betrayal, loss of a child and motherhood. The whole thesis has been spatially concerned from the outset – from the physical transatlantic crossings of expatriation to the traversing of mental and physical spaces.

The constraints of time and space have undoubtedly left me unable to wholly examine some really interesting and vital areas of research. For me, the most fundamental one is the ways in which Jewish identity can be seen to enrich and complicate the dynamic even further. Six out of nine poets in this study have a strong Jewish heritage which I explored briefly in Chapter Three in the work of Loy and Fainlight. In terms of Fainlight, I argued that the poem was a way of healing the sense of betrayal that she felt over concealing her Jewish identity. With Loy, she was able to align herself as an ‘Anglo-Mongrel’ with her Jewish father within the imaginative poetic space. Jewish identity is also a growing area of critical interest with one important study in particular which looks extensively at the work of Ruth

Fainlight and Elaine Feinstein entitled *British Jewish Women Writers 1880-1980*.³⁹⁶

Another thread I would have liked to have examined further is the imagist legacy in twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry. Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Rouse speak of the profound influence imagist principles had upon their own work. Yet many Imagist principles of clarity and condensation can also be seen in the work of Fainlight, Stevenson and Salzman. It is hoped that these important areas will receive the critical attention they deserve in the future.

In the final, self-reflective stages of this research, I started considering which poet has had the greatest impact on me in terms of my own personal enjoyment. It wasn't difficult to conclude that I have grown to admire the poetry written by Levertov above any of the other poets in this study. This is primarily for the fact that she seems to convey a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Her response to the world comes so deep from within herself, from the way she utilises poetic form to the way she perceives the world in which she lives and clearly loves. This thesis has argued that the space of poetry can harmonise the discord of displacement, and yet with Levertov there is always the underlying sense that she sees her position as an outsider as one of privilege. Remember her excited recollections as a young child that she was an 'artist-person and had a destiny.'³⁹⁷ As such, she doesn't see poetry as a healing space but as a space of affirmation, not only of a female identity, but of the human condition as a whole. She has an obvious political consciousness in terms of feminism yet she also revels in her femaleness and in her female

³⁹⁶ Nadia Valman (ed.), *British Jewish Women Writers: 1880-1990* (Wayne State University Press, 2007).

³⁹⁷ Denise Levertov in the introduction to her work in Jeni Couzyn (ed.) *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 77.

body. Likewise, Loy's poetic oeuvre has started to impact upon reconstructions of twentieth-century literature. Her voice, always radical and daring, is also the most female-centred of all the poets. Her poems often explicitly write the female body in all its ecstasy and pain, and admirably she often broaches topics later generations of poets would have found shocking. Her output is certainly one of the most exciting within the context of this study. Without doubt, the previously overlooked or misrepresented term 'Anglo-American' has illustrated that it is capable of upholding a rich and illuminating critical terrain.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview with Ruth Fainlight conducted on 21st April 2004

Melanie Petch: Ruth, having been born in New York and living mostly in England from the age of fifteen I'd like to begin by asking you about your poetry on place and the way it so beautifully captures the environments in which you've lived and visited. In 'Birds in India' you seem to be quite excited by rootlessness – you describe how the sound of birds disturbs the old associations of English country gardens and opens up new possibilities: 'another realm and dimension of life'. Has nostalgia for a place ever caused you pain, or has it been easy for you to recreate new nostalgias, as your poem suggests?

Ruth Fainlight: That's a very interesting question, but first of all I wanted to interpose with pointing out a poem, I can't remember the title, but it's an early poem which seems very relevant to this. It begins: 'once you start falling, you fall forever/ once you let go, there's no hold anywhere,/ wherever your home was having left it there can be no other' ... I don't think I can carry on. But that seems very relevant. I mean I certainly have a feeling of rootlessness because neither my mother nor my father was born in the United States. My father was born in London, and my mother was born in what is now known as the Ukraine, and went to America as a very young child. My father went there as a very young man and met her and they got married. So in my childhood they travelled back and forth between England and America, but I spent the crucial years, it seems to me, in the United States; that's say from birth to five and from ten to fifteen, and in between I was in London. But from my earliest memories when I was in America I was regarded as English, and when I was in England I was regarded as American. Certainly, when I came back when I was fifteen and went to school ... I mean it was an enormous culture shock in coming to England, at that time. Part of it, nothing to do with myself individually, but because it was very soon after the Second World War and the contrast with the United States was enormous – to do with living styles and things. So, rootlessness? I think my mother felt rootless and I think that I inherited that from my mother because of her transplantation and having to learn a new language – I've never had that experience. But when she went to America at the age of five or six none of them spoke English. And of course, having a mother who never felt at ease where she was and then moving around a lot myself I have great sympathy for immigrants.

M.P. And what do you think of the idea that places have the power to connect with us personally, perhaps even evoking sensations of love and desire? Do you find these feelings are stronger in your place of birth, or do you think it possible to experience them in other places?

R.F. Well yes, certainly it can. Well that's been my experience anyway. I suppose the place that means most to me – that I have no real family or national connection with – is Majorca, where I lived for four years in my early to mid twenties, and that landscape of the Mediterranean. I know sometimes when we are driving south you reach a line when driving

down through France say, when you are in a different zone and the climate and the landscape ... its obviously geological and climatic. You're in the zone of the influence of the Mediterranean and that lifts my heart enormously. I was saying that to Alan this morning actually. We were talking about it because we just went up to Nottingham because he has a new novel out, and there have been lots of launch activities and one of the things was that he gave a reading up near Nottingham, and our son came – this is nothing to do with my poetry, or maybe it is, who knows? But anyway he's moving and he's looking for a house not too far from Nottingham which seems to me very bizarre because that's where Alan comes from. He might end up living within twenty miles of Nottingham which is where – you know, it's his ancestral place, in a sense. So we were talking about whether this is a significant factor for him – it's to do with work you see it's not that he's chosen to move. It's just a coincidence. And so I said, does it mean anything to you, that sort of landscape? And I said that the place that means most to me is the Mediterranean. Even though I *love* lots of parts of England, much of the South East, because that's where I know.

M.P. Is it the anonymity you like in Majorca? Not to be burdened by national and cultural restrictions. Do you like that sense of anonymity, is that what raises your spirits?

R.F. No, I mean it's just ... I mean I don't have many connections in England really. Oh, I don't know whether I do or not. What I mean is, that because I'm Jewish, one isn't English. And my father, his grandfather came to England from Poland, and the English don't think. You know, I'm a woman and I'm an American, or you know, it's an important part of my identity, and I'm Jewish, so all those three things. I certainly don't blend seamlessly into the landscape here. And I've never felt so much a foreigner as when I've lived in an English village. [...] When you live in Spain or France or places like that – I've spent eight to ten years living in Mediterranean places – [...] you're very protected because you're a foreigner, but it's an identity. You fit into this identity and the more familiar you become. And if you stay somewhere long and get to know people you have your role – you know like that Happy Families card game where there's a butcher and a publican and there's a foreigner? And that's your identity; whereas in England, it's not the same. If you go to a village, an English village, where life centres around the pub, and the church and the Women's Institute, and what have you, I mean there's no place, actually, it's not the same role that you have. You're just uncomfortable. I've written a lot of poems about it.

M.P. Yes, 'The English Country Cottage' in your recent collection is very interesting.

R.F. Yes, but there are lots from earlier. I mean I could go through my work and point out probably a dozen or a score of poems that would completely illuminate my thesis very specifically.

M.P. Denise Levertov once said that her cultural duality made her feel very special and that it fuelled her creativity. Do you think that you have a privileged position, in this sense?

R.F. That's interesting because I didn't know that she'd said that; she was Jewish as well and her relationship was as complicated as mine, at least. Privileged, because of it? No, no I can't agree with that. It's just a fact. Well let me think about it. Say it again what she said please.

M.P. She talks about her cultural duality and she speaks of it in terms of it being a very privileged position for her, that it injected her work with vitality and a purpose, as such, and she knew it was her destiny to be a poet and a writer and to write about her experiences. This is written in the introduction to her poetry in *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets*, alongside yours.

R.F. Ahh, it's such a long time since I've read that book because it came out in 1985, or something. Well I think that's an accurate description of one situation. And I certainly feel privileged to have been touched by the muse, or however you want to put it - to be able to write and to want to write poetry. But I don't know whether it has anything to do with being English and American or anything like that.

M.P. But what about feelings of loss? I've heard somewhere before that you can not write until you have lost. Is that the same for a place that you've lived in perhaps, to have loved and lost a place?

R.F. Oh yes, I mean I've written poems about leaving our house in France as well, haven't I? I can't remember the name. I mean we left it in the mid to late eighties so around that time. Yes, I think that cultivating one's sense of loss is part of the process of writing poetry - excepting it and examining it, not putting it away, not hiding it, the opposite of that.

M.P. I'd like to refer to your poem, 'Unseemly'. You say, 'I left my race and family/ to learn about myself.' I sense that you see uprooting to be a necessary process for the poet in order to find a clear sense of self. That to lose or leave allows you the space to reconstruct identity as such. Did you feel that it was necessary for you to leave your race and family in order to find yourself or was the experience one that you now consider to have been vital?

R.F. Well I think that it's exactly the other way round. I don't think I consciously decided to leave my race and family. It's the retrospective look - I mean all poetry is the product, or not all poetry, my poetry, and not all my poetry but a lot of my poetry, is the product of thinking about the past, looking back. I don't have all my poetry in my head but that's a very, very early poem isn't it? I'm more than twice the age I was when that book was published. And I think that I've written other poems, 'Who told me my place/ it takes generations to breed such a true ...', you know that poem? I mean that relates directly to this poem doesn't it? That's a continuation of the same line of thought. But it isn't that one decides to do anything in one's life, things happen, you move instinctively or you are pulled in a certain direction and then you understand one's whole life is a process of trying to understand why one's done what one's done, don't you think?

M.P. I'd like to refer to your poem 'The English Country Cottage'. It seems to express regret at not having remained more loyal to your Jewish roots. That moving to England and assimilating English culture was a kind of betrayal. Can you explain the reasoning behind this poem? Am I right in saying that you feel a sense of betrayal?

R.F. Well, that's one of the feelings that I have amongst many others, yes certainly. I mean it's a big thing in Judaism and certainly when I was a young woman, although it's probably the same now. I mean to marry out was, you know, it upsets everyone very much. And also, there's the feeling, certainly when I was that age, there was the feeling that six million Jews had been killed. It's all quite obvious, all the different lines of thought. And of course all those thoughts went through my head; that sounds too objective and rational. I mean, you've read the poem sensitively.

M.P. I'm interested in thresholds and spaces in which writers/poets/women can forego a process of self analysis. In your poem 'The Journey' you evoke the feeling that the journey from one place to another creates a space in which you can freely self-reflect.

R.F. It's a nice poem. I read it last night. Have you noticed that it's quite tight, with the rhymes?

M.P. Yes, and I love the way that you've captured a sense of self-reflection from all different angles; from the perspective of another passenger and from the reflections in the mirror/window/glass. Clearly you've considered this space or threshold of inbetweenness. In what ways do you find the journey space compelling?

R.F. I mean personally, in my own life, journeys are wonderful. They are just these spaces between that one can inhabit and be nowhere.

M.P. Is it a liberating space?

R.F. Oh yes.

M.P. And is it a female space?

R.F. No, not particularly. It's a poetic space.

M.P. And you like being there?

R.F. Oh yes, but I don't think it's particularly female.

M.P. I think that your poetry has a wonderfully positive outlook in the way you express the tensions of rootlessness. Your poem 'Without Naomi' is poignant in the way it describes feelings of exile and the way it is overcome through the learning of a new language and the nurturing of new seeds. Can you tell me a little more about this poem? Is it autobiographical?

R.F. Well, of course, everything is autobiographical. But, it's a sort of mediation on the Ruth and Naomi story. My two names are Ruth and Esther and what a gift to have those names and to think about the stories of Ruth and Esther. So, it seems very appropriate. I mean Ruth was in exile and she had Naomi, and at that time I felt 'boo hoo'. You know I think that one has to do it, whatever that is.

M.P. I think the poem has resonances of the Anglo-American debate that American literary history is not as fertile and rich as a British literary history. And the idea that Americans come here and have to try so much harder to fit into a British literary canon. When you moved over here, did you feel an overriding sense of loyalty to American poets?

R.F. No, I was 15, come on. I loved poetry, but when I said I loved poetry I was voracious and indiscriminate. I didn't care if I was reading Whitman or Wordsworth. I call myself an English Language poet, not a *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poet, you know what I mean by this? I don't really want to be called an American poet, or an English poet, or a Woman poet, or heaven forbid, a Jewish poet. I am an English Language poet - that's my identity, my affiliation, my loyalty, my connection to this wonderful language. Poe is just terrific. Shelley's terrific. And Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte. Why should one have to choose? I'm equally loyal to them all.

M.P. So, at fifteen were you aware of those debates?

R.F. No, not at all.

M.P. In what ways do you feel that American poetry differs from British poetry?

R.F. I don't know, but it does. And the most interesting thing is that when I met Adrienne Rich (this was in the seventies), I met her here *en passant*; she'd come here to do an international poetry festival at the hall. Anyway, I was introduced to her and she gave me her address, or some way of contacting her in New York, it must have been her address, it was in the seventies, and one didn't have email. Anyway I went to New York and was staying with my cousin, and it turned out it was only a couple of blocks from where Adrienne Rich lived. So I got in touch with her and she invited me over for lunch, or something like that, and she said, "I was so interested to meet you and now that you've told me that you're really American it explains everything because I read your poetry and I was really surprised that it was written by an English poet because it seemed like an American poet." And I said, "What do you mean?" Well, I don't know if I said, "What do you mean?", because I was quite overwhelmed by being with her. But we did talk about it a bit, and she said it was the rhythm and somehow the sound. And another thing that I wondered at that time, is in a way, there's a stronger Latinate influence, have you noticed this? Is this a new thought to you? This is my own thought. I mean I haven't read this anywhere. But, if you think about it, so many people, so many Americans, well of course, it doesn't apply now, but it certainly did at the beginning of the twentieth century. I mean so many people went into the United States and they had to learn English – English was not their mother

tongue. And then the next generation, I mean, I didn't meet my mother's parents – they died before I was four. But they never learnt English and in the house there was another language; it was Yiddish I think, because my mother and aunt used to speak Yiddish together when I was a child, and it was maddening because I couldn't understand it. And then when my mother came to England that was another sadness for her, that there was no one to speak Yiddish with, so she never spoke Yiddish again because she didn't live near her sister. And so all these people who went to the United States, see I am talking about a couple of generations back, but a lot of writers of my age, their parents would have had non-English speaking parents and they would have grown up with this, you see ... this is getting long and complicated. In England there is this strong Anglo-Saxon influence and I think that because of the mixture of languages of people who went to the United States, when they learnt English it was somehow more on the Latinate structure. I'd be interested if you'd tell me from your studies if you think there's anything in this theory of mine, because I must confess I haven't gone through texts as if I was writing a thesis. But that was one of the things, because once or twice, a long time ago, say in the seventies, it was commented to me, I can't even remember by whom, that my language, they didn't say it was Latinate, but they said, "You don't use much Anglo-Saxon." So maybe it's that. There is a slight difference isn't there? I think rhythm and sound but I haven't examined it myself.

M.P. There is. And yet it is so hard to pinpoint exactly what it is. I think that often American poetry can look very different on the page. But there is something else, and like you, I'm very interested to find out just how to define what it is.

R.F. If you were to look at Imagist poetry for example, and to do an analysis of the sort of vocabulary of about five poems it would be interesting. I don't know if that's it, but it really meant a lot to me when Adrienne Rich said that because it was somehow a confirmation that I was still a bit American. You know, that I hadn't lost what seemed to me really crucial and essential to my identity.

M.P. Is it important to you to be able to cross Anglo-American boundaries?

R.F. Oh, yes.

M.P. Do you write differently then for an American audience, bearing in mind all the little colloquialisms that are different?

R.F. Oh no, I never think about who I'm writing for. I don't write for an audience. And anyway I can't think how that would apply to poetry unless one were a performance poet perhaps. I write a poem and then I send it out to a magazine. There are a few magazines in America and a few magazines here which would be my first choice and if it isn't taken in one then I'll send it out to another. So it's completely arbitrary as to whether a poem's first printed in an American or an English periodical. I don't decide; they decide whether they want it or not.

M.P. Where do you feel that your literary reputation is more established?

R.F. Probably here, because I live here, I know more people. I haven't been to America for years now. I used to go very frequently and I've been poet in residence but just haven't been. First of all, for a few years I've had a lot of health problems and that kept me. I'm better now, but that broke the momentum. I want to go back to New York very much now. And also the cousin I stayed with died, and because I couldn't accept a few invitations to do things then I'm not invited to do them anymore, you know the ways these things happen?

I must show you something, in fact, I'm going to give it to you. You know my piece that was in the *Times Literary Supplement* about Sylvia Plath? Well it's been reprinted. I only have two copies but I'm going to give you one as they're going to send me 25 copies. They haven't come yet but I hope that they'll arrive now. I gave one copy to Alan and I'll give you one because I'm expecting the others any moment. They've reprinted the piece but with more photographs and also a few poems. Well, two poems of mine and one of Sylvia's, and also a letter that I wrote to Sylvia which they got from the archives of Smith college and which I hadn't seen since I wrote it; two pages – it's a wonderful thing so that will be nice for you to have.

M.P. Did you feel quite exposed knowing that the letter was going to be published?

R.F. Well they sent me a copy of it so I could read it before I agreed. Well, I mean the letter moved me very much because it was just before I was coming to England. I wrote it from Morocco, just talking about what we would do, and I said, "How do you think the people of North Tawton would react to a veiled Moroccan woman?" No, it moved me a lot, the letter. But, I didn't feel that was any reason for it not to be published. There was nothing in it that I didn't want to be read.

M.P. It is interesting when you said about the American publisher and how things were changed to create more of a more biographical focus, such as photos and letters. Does your critical reception differ in certain countries?

R.F. Well, I haven't had all my books published in America. I've had only five collections come out in the US. And I've published about twelve or thirteen altogether. I've had my work translated into French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian, I mean, I have books in those four languages. And I've had a very, very good response from France, a lot of critical response. Not really much critical response from Spain. The Italian book, I've had lots of critical response. That's interesting isn't it?

M.P. I want to talk now, Ruth, about the home and motherhood as they are two of the areas that I'm looking at in my thesis. Your poem, 'Domestical', seems to capture perfectly all that you feel on a woman's role in the domestic space. To quote you:

...I sense how the others avoid me,
fearing a breakdown, potential of chaos,
genie let loose from the bottle

Because I will not admit what I think, I have
no opinions; never admit what I want,
have forgotten my needs; never admit who I am,
have lost my name and freedom

You suggest that the domestic space creates a kind of identity crisis for women, is that true?

R.F. It's a bit like the *Stepford Wives*, isn't it? It's an extreme frame of mind. I mean, as I say, even in that piece about Sylvia and Jane, like them, I too, am a product of that enormously oppressive 1950's perfect wife, perfect housekeeper, perfect everything. Which is less oppressive for people of your age, isn't it? Or is it?

M.P. I think it's still an issue, yet it seems to be more hidden now - it's embedded deep in people's consciousnesses.

R.F. Yes, you're conditioned to it somehow. Does it make you feel angry when you feel this instinct?

M.P. It does make me feel very angry because everything things seems so natural – it's the naturalness that I'm sceptical of, in a sense. Women can be made to feel a certain way can't they?

R.F. Well, that's why you respond to that poem.

M.P. I really wanted know whether you thought that the domestic space was a liberating space? Do you feel safe within the home? Knowing what society is like outside, or do you find that the home is oppressive – the domestic space – does your poetry reflect this?

R.F. That's interesting. It seems to me that the outside being alarming and threatening and so therefore the home is a safe place, on the one hand. On the other hand, the home is the place that consumes you and negates you. The home being the place that consumes and negates you is what we were talking about just now from the fifties and from the beginning of time actually. The home is the place that's safe, although both of these are permanent states of mind and permanent features of reality. But at the moment I think, in the last ten years, the outside is beginning to seem more and more threatening isn't it? I think it seems a less threatening state thirty years ago than it does now. So thinking of the home being a safe place, I don't think it was too much in my consciousness as a young woman because it was a safe place and you accepted it, but you weren't conscious of it because there wasn't this contrast between outside and inside, from the point of view of security and safety, or that's how it seems to me.

M.P. I sense from your *Burning Wire* collection, that the female is still a real preoccupation for you. Your poem 'Knives' says how women are 'halved to human – woman/wife/silent one:' Do you still think women have to fight the same battles in the twenty-first century?

R.F. I'm sure that they do. I mean, after all, let's face it, I've been married for so long we've practically sorted it all out. We've fought so many bitter battles over the years and also I'm an old woman.

M.P. What prompted you to write that poem?

R.F. I don't know. I'm trying to remember. Well it's one of those fairy stories and the image has stayed with me all my life – the little mermaid who sacrifices her identity. It's a really primal story you can never forget and it's a useful image – useful that's not the word. No, it's vital. Yes, something must have made me think of it but I can't remember what.

M.P. Do you feel that your views on feminism have intensified or weakened over the years?

R.F. Well, I didn't have to have my consciousness raised even from being a little girl. I can remember, this is in the thirties, yes, when I was about six and I first came to England. I met my father's father for the first time, my paternal grandfather, whom I disliked intensely because he was a little cock of the walk, you know, he'd been married three times and he was tough and strutted around and women were supposed to revolve around him. Immediately we were in confrontation, and I was this little six-year old. And he would always say, "Oh girls don't do that." And I remember him saying once, "Be good sweet maid and let men be clever." And I thought, "Bugger you!" So, that's my first feminist moment you see, when I was six and I'm sure that I had earlier ones. No, I mean I haven't changed at all. And my feelings certainly haven't weakened.

M.P. As a successful poet and writer do you feel that you have personally won the battle with domestic demon or does it still continue to haunt you?

R.F. Well I'm terribly lucky because I have a very nice husband, you see. Much less than it used to I think. And yet, did it haunt me more? I didn't have the burning desire to succeed and be perfect that Sylvia Plath had, definitely not. It was always much more dubious and oblique and sceptical, my response to those pressures. But it was an enormous problem for me. I don't know any woman who doesn't have them.

M.P. Yes, I agree. It's something to be able articulate these concerns though – to be able to verbalise the problem.

R.F. I mean, 'It must' is a very relevant poem ... You must try and get hold of a copy of 'This Time of the Year'. I probably only have two copies, if that. There'll be lots of poems in here that will be new to you, I'm sure [referring to *Selected Poems*].

M.P. If we can just go back to the *Cages* collection again. Motherhood seems to dominate the collection, did it coincide with the birth of your own children?

R.F. I only had one child – I have an adopted niece, I mean an adopted daughter who, in fact, is the child of Alan's eldest sister. She was left orphaned so we adopted her. My son was born in 1962 and *Cages* was published in 1966, so yes.

M.P. I'm so interested in this mother/child relationship and it seems that your poetry so often highlights really deep tensions within it. On the one hand, you've got this utter adoration, on the other, something more sinister; I'm referring specifically to your poems 'The Screaming Baby' and 'The Infanticide'. Motherhood is a compelling subject but why do you think so much inner conflict surrounds it?

R.F. Well, first of all I had several miscarriages before I managed to have a child. No reason could be found for the miscarriages. I'm sure it was psychic tension, you know. I'm sure I just expelled this alien thing because I couldn't face it. I was scared. It was like an allergic reaction. You know that movie *Alien*, and something comes out? This is a very primitive and ancient feeling about being pregnant, and I'm nothing if not primitive. I mean, I think poets are incredibly connected to the primitive, as well as being delicate, sophisticated and refined, and so forth. There has to be one foot in the Neanderthal. I could understand easily mothers killing their babies because they were frightened, and on the other hand, adoring and worshiping them. And it just took me over for years; from about 1961. No, no, David was born in 1962. We came back to England from Majorca in 1958, and I'm sure I got pregnant at the end of that year. I had about four pregnancies and miscarriages - in and out of hospital - it just completely dominated that phase of my life, so it was on my mind, definitely.

M.P. Do you think motherhood is a natural experience for women?

R.F. Of course, it's natural in the sense that that's the biology of it all. My mother was the fourteenth child and only five survived to adulthood – can you imagine? It's unbelievable to try to. When I look at pictures of my grandmother in my living room ... and to think that she had fourteen children. This sort of stern looking woman, and several died and others in childhood. I mean I've written a poem about that, 'My Fuschia'. I can't remember what book it's in. It's definitely earlier than later. Ah, 'My Fucshia', it's from *The Knot*.

M.P. You have some wonderful motherhood poems. I suppose really what I'm trying to say is that the mothering instinct, is it a natural feeling? The poetry I've been reading of Loy and Riding suggests that there doesn't seem to be that natural instinct to want to mother and love the child, as such. There's a real tension - almost as if you're being forced to love this little thing that you don't know. I was wondering whether you felt that the mothering instinct was natural, or is it something you have to learn?

R.F. Well I think both of the things exist. This reaction to Mina Loy's poetry that you're describing, of course, that's natural. To cherish, protect and love is natural. Some people are stronger and some people are less strong. I don't think that there's an automatic 'natural'. Some women just don't seem to want to have children at all – are not interested – and that's their nature. I think the sort of gamete of sexual identity – this is another subject

– but some people are intensely female or intensely male and some people are almost hermaphroditic, in their psyche, at least. And I'm sure it's to do with hormones and things like that. So, I think that sexual reactions are connected with reproduction.

M.P. I love your poem, 'My Mother's Eyes', in your recent collection as it focuses on the child/mother/grandmother relationship. In what ways do you consider the birth of a grandchild to change the dynamics of the mother/child relationship?

R.F. I don't know. I haven't written much about it. My adopted daughter has children who are older and they are my grandchildren legally. I'm attached to them, but I don't have the same feelings about them because they are not my genetic grandchildren. So that's what I mean when I say that I'm primitive. When we adopted her, I remember saying to a friend once, "Well of course I don't have the same feelings – it's the grain of her hair and her skin, you know, she's not mine". She seemed quite surprised, this friend, and she thought, "She's a child and we adopted her and how can you...?" But it's just a sort of physical and primitive thing. So, in the same way I haven't the same feeling for her children even though I feel very grandmotherly to them and I love them. But the children of my son ... See I haven't had a daughter. I think the children of one's daughter would be the most intense grandmother experience – more than one's son. Because, after all, it would be your daughter you had given birth to and your daughter had given birth to these children, and that's a primitive connection. Of course, I adore my grandchildren. But, I just wonder if ... I don't know if there's any validity to it. I'll never be able to test it – if I had a daughter, whether I would be able to tell the difference between the children of the daughter and the children of the son.

M.P. It would be interesting to know whether there are differences in the relationship between the mother and daughter and mother and son.

R.F. You see the eldest of the grandchildren isn't even eight yet – seven and three quarters, so that's a very short time for me. It takes me such a long time for my reactions to work through it into poetry.

M.P. How lovely though to have time to reflect on your feelings and work through them?

R.F. The work's going on rather than me working on it. I'm a great believer in that. It took me twenty-seven or twenty-nine years to write 'Sugar-paper Blue', after the experience. I wrote that poem in the nineties and it was in 1965 that I went. It took all that time and I've been thinking about it and wanted to write something about it. It was such an amazing experience – to hear Anna Akhmatova up above my head. I just didn't know how to go about it and I just couldn't get into it to open it out – to make it accessible for poetry. And finally, something happened. I was just describing that room and sugar-paper blue, you know, the colour of the blue did it.

M.P. There's an idea that poetry must be spontaneous?

R.F. Oh no, it's recollected in tranquillity. No, that idea that it's spontaneous is totally ... People, young people, who come to workshops who talk to me after readings, say, "Do you work on your poems?" "Do you ever make any corrections?" I mean, I take a poem to twenty or thirty drafts. I say, "Of course, I take it through many drafts". And then I say, "Do you write poetry?" And they say, "Yes". And I say, "So you know, you must work on your poems?" And they say, "Oh no, no, the inspiration comes and I couldn't." And I just think, how ridiculous. They don't have the vaguest idea of what it means to write a poem. I mean, it's just an out-gush which is very nice for them. Maybe once in ten thousand times something acceptable is produced in that way, but I don't know anyone really who works like that. I've never heard of it, have you?

M.P. I hear people say that you have to write poetry spontaneously, but I can imagine poetry like that would leave you feeling very cold five years down the road, when the strong recollection of that precise moment is gone. Whereas if it has been thought through ...

R.F. Yes, poetry is language and words. It is a craft and an art, it's not just self-expression.

M.P. Just to go back to your female poetry, Ruth, do you ever worry that your female-centred work is going to be received less favourably by male critics or critics in general?

R.F. No.

M.P. And how has your female centred work been reviewed as a whole?

R.F. Well, I don't know what you mean when you say female-centred work because all my work is female centred. All my work is female centred in the sense that it's written by a female. I'm trying to think whether I've ever had a critical comment from a male reviewer. Yes, I had a very, very nice review from Derek Mahon for *Sibyls and Others*, in which he says, "If there's a touch of feminist defiance, then so much the better". I think that's the only thing I can remember. Yes, here it is. "If there is a suggestion of feminist defiance here, so much the better; Fainlight isn't strident." So, when I read that I thought, "What a silly ..." No, I mean, I'm a great admirer of his poetry and I was delighted with the review. "Fainlight isn't strident ..." I thought, well, I'm glad that I'm not strident. But that isn't quite what he meant. It wasn't only that he was saying she's not strident, he's saying that she's not strident as a woman, wouldn't you agree? So that invokes a picture of this ranting, strident feminist. I was very pleased with the review and was amused by that. I think I even made some comment to him, not that I know him well. I only know him from meeting him when he lived in London. I haven't seen him for years. I see him now and then at literary things. So when this review came out, I saw him very shortly after, so I think I twitted him about it a little.

M.P. I just wanted to ask you about women networks; they were so popular during the modernist period have you seen any changes throughout your writing career?

R.F. I don't know because I don't know anything about women networks.

M.P. Do have a group of women writers with whom you keep in contact with?

R.F. I have women writer friends. I don't really believe it is a network. You know, they're my friends. Practically all of the people that I see are writers, or if not writers, to a lesser extent artists and composers, artists of some sort or another, almost all, a few academics, and one or two other civilians. But I don't have a network in the sense of exchanging poems and talking. Sometimes I think how nice it would be, but it's just never happened in my life.

M.P. I suppose with the current influx of writing groups more [networks] will be created. Do you think that's a good thing?

R.F. I don't know. So many people are writing now, aren't they? But I'm sure that the number of good writers hasn't increased. It keeps them out of mischief, I guess.

M.P. Ruth, just one final question, have you ever yearned for any other vocation than the one of poet?

R.F. Well I'm sorry that I didn't keep up with my painting and drawing as much I would ... I've hardly at all. It's only occasionally and sometimes I just yearn to be able to do it. I went to Art College for two years and then I left. And then, a few years later, I thought, I must go back. I went back and I'd lost my manual facility; they say, "Once you ride a bike you can always ride a bike ..." And I was so mortified and stupid. You know, stupid pride stopped me from carrying on, I realise that now. It was a very painful experience to go and try to do something and I just couldn't do it. I was back at square one. I didn't persevere. I was regretful. I just see it as stupid. I'm sorry that I was so stupid. But then the events of my life led me away. And also, as an alternative life I should have wanted to go to university. I didn't go to university because my father didn't think women should have higher education – I think I would have been quite good at it. And then, life took me in another direction. And sometimes I think what a shame I didn't learn Latin or Greek; those are the things that I regret. I can remember writing poems when I was eleven and twelve so I didn't really ever choose it. Or, it was never anything I decided. It was something that was there. So it was the most natural thing to do, I suppose. But it would be nice to read Greek, don't you think so?

Appendix 2: Interview with Anne Rouse conducted in February 2006

Melanie Petch: Anne, like a tradition of women writers before you, you have moved from America to Britain. Could you tell me a little about your experience of cultural duality? Was it an easy transition to make?

Anne Rouse: I was interested in England long before I arrived. This was probably due less to my English and Scottish ancestry, than to children's books such as the Green Knowe stories and C. S. Lewis. Later, British pop music - especially the Beatles' "Penny Lane" - intrigued me. It seemed to be written in a secret language.

I left Virginia and my family to go to college in Illinois a few weeks before my 17th birthday. The following year I spent in Oxford, studying for A-levels, and subsequently read history at the University of London. In other words, the entry into Britain and adulthood happened simultaneously

After a further post-grad year I took up nursing, and became active in local health politics. Eventually I was appointed to Islington District Health Authority, representing the Labour-run local Council. So no, the transition wasn't too difficult---I'd become fully involved in London life.

M. P. For many of the poets in my study, crossing the Atlantic was more a case of self-imposed exile – often, they moved in order to marry, further their education or to find creative freedom. Can you identify with any of these experiences?

A. R. Officially I was on a year abroad from a small Midwestern college. Unofficially I was applying to English universities to do a BA.

M. P. My research looks specifically at the work of Anglo-American poets. How do you feel about being positioned in a sub-tradition of this kind? Do you feel that the term Anglo-American applies to you?

A. R. Because it gives an idea of origins and dialect, I think "Anglo-American" is a reasonably useful term - like the term "Northern Irish" - and like "Northern Irish", it covers a range of backgrounds and views.

M. P. Many poets who have experienced cultural duality frequently write about places they have loved, lost or adopted. Often, places seem to have the power to reconfigure the self. Is there anywhere that you feel more at one with the world?

A. R. There are several. East Sussex appeals to me as a writer. Conrad, James and Woolf lived near by. Virginia and Northern Italy are dear to me. London, where I lived for much of my adult life, is my adopted imaginative home.

M. P. I've recognized a pattern in Anglo-American poetry that highlights a contentious relationship between some of the poets and England – whether they are Americans living in Britain, Britons living in America or, indeed, British poets in general. Your own voice is often satirical in your observations of British culture (I think specifically of your poems 'Cat Fancy' and 'England Nil') I think that distance often affords the writer a sharper sense of vision and perception. Would you agree?

A. R. Rather than being a specific cultural critique, "England Nil" reflects a fascination with misdirected energies and excess. Several contemporary British poets---Armitage and Duffy come to mind--have written laddish poems. I suspect it's for the same reason.

Generally those early satires were written from the point of view of a participant in, and lover of, the culture. However, I agree that being foreign can give you a fresh perspective--a child's eye.

M. P. Many of your poems embrace an American vernacular, has this become more pronounced since your departure from America? Or has it weakened? Do you think it possible to define a specifically British or American style of writing? Or a British or American voice?

A. R. The language of the poetry is hybrid. It's difficult for me to tell how much American vernacular appears in the work. In Virginia Arcady the word "reckon" is a Southern dialect word that my father would use playfully now and again, and there may be other examples related to childhood. American English and English English have grown closer together during my time here, which complicates things further.

I think that a British voice can usually be distinguished from an American voice. Current American poetry tends to be more prosaic, less dense and textured. Of course both labels cover a range of voices. Poems by Ken Smith and Wendy Cope, say, are very different.

M. P. I'm interested in the influence Imagism has had on twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry. Ezra Pound claimed that Imagist principles were grounded in 'direct treatment of the 'thing' whether objective or subjective'; a clear and concrete form of expression using only words that are absolutely necessary; and the use of free verse that evokes the tempo of the musical phrase. When constructing your poems, Anne, are there any technical principles that you consciously use as a template?

A. R. Pound influenced me when I began writing. I followed the dictum, "Poetry is condensation" to the extent that poems occasionally failed to breathe, and had to be discarded.

The poem should have an organic shape, a sinewy quality that draws the reader down the page to the last line. I'm very conscious of the theatricality of poetry, but it's also a form of private musing, and it has to be honest to come across. Often I've found that a muddy

phrase reflects some kind of failure in self-knowledge.

I try to have at least two things going on in a line, however short.

M. P. How do your poems take shape? Can you explain the process between your initial idea and final draft?

A. R. I hear rhythms and phrases; often see a central image. Usually I scribble down an extremely messy draft of freely-associated lines, then cross out the extraneous and hook any remnants together. The subsequent tinkering goes on almost endlessly. The poem completes itself when I can't change it any more.

The best poems arrive almost whole, although I'm convinced that it's the effort expended on the preceding poems that allows this to happen.

M. P. Your poems have been published in papers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic; where do you feel that your literary reputation is more established? Can you explain why?

A. R. The books were published and reviewed in Britain, so it's probably not too surprising that they're better known here. Because they deal with some aspect of recent social history, a few poems have found their way into the educational fabric: a GCSE exam, and one or two university reading lists, for example.

Although the big anthologies like *Staying Alive* do well, US publishers import less contemporary British poetry than they do fiction. As in Britain, the market for slim volumes remains small, and the university-based US creative writing industry already produces a number of home-grown poets.

However, three poems published in *Poetry* last year subsequently showed up on websites like *Poetry Daily*. The Gray Wolf anthology, *New British Poets*, has also been helpful in introducing Canadian and American readers to my work. I'm currently talking with a publisher over there--it's US publication that will bring a US readership.

M. P. You pay tribute to poets Laura Riding and Jean Rhys in your *Timing* collection. In what ways have these poets inspired you to write about them? Which other writers have influenced and continue to influence your work? Who did you admire as a child and adolescent growing up in America?

A. R. Jean Rhys interested me for her exceptional prose style, and for what I'd call the courage of her aloneness. Laura Riding threw down a challenge to twentieth century poets by eventually rejecting poetry altogether. I think that she'd discovered that language is actually an inadvertent way of distancing oneself from the object. She seemed to have the rigorous, truth-seeking temperament of a philosopher, and she couldn't abide that. But there is truth, and truth. Feelings steal into poems, as they do into paintings, and reveal more to

us sometimes even than mechanical records like tapes and photographs.

I've written about Plato, another poetry skeptic, for the same reason.

As a child I pored over Louis Untermeyer's *Treasury of Golden Verse*, discovering Tennyson and Elizabeth Bishop in the process. I was also influenced the cadences of the King James Bible we heard every Sunday. In high school Yeats, especially, showed me what poetry could do. I'd become a feminist by then, reading de Beauvoir and Friedan, as well as other 60's political lit such as the Autobiography of Malcom X--- in between classics like Jane Eyre.

I read a lot as an adolescent and it's hard to pick out favourites. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* moved and confused me. Was I an artist, or the girl he was watching on the shore? The answer seemed to be: both.

M. P. Anglo-American women poets often use myth as a way of reconstructing an imaginative space. I see slight evidence of mythical landscapes in your work, particularly when you draw upon dreams and fairytales (I think mainly of your poems 'Fairyland' and 'The Steps'). What do you find intriguing about these imaginative spaces? As a poet and as a woman do you feel that it is essential to have spaces which you can creatively inhabit without male censorship? Does a feminist impetus drive your work?

A. R. The imaginative spaces you mention are part of the myth kitty--the collective dreaming which I think every poet taps into. The interesting thing is that the process starts off as a private musing, when you are alone as anyone could be, and if you're very lucky, finally emerges as a public poem with its own life. It mirrors our own gestation as human beings. The poem only succeeds if it works for others, and to do that it must come from the same deep sources. As you suggest, I've worked hard to establish a private space, and have managed lately to avoid most people and situations that tend to inhibit the writing.

As to whether a feminist impulse drives my work - there is one, but it's not the whole story. Feminism is an essential and valued critique, but I see poetry as an affirmation.

M. P. I love your poem, 'The Passage', Anne - I sense that it conveys serious undertones - the tension between inside and outside, domesticity and freedom, negotiating thresholds - but I'm not sure if this is your intention. What inspired you to write this poem?

A. R. It was a little jarring to see the plundered and abandoned rucksack in the passage leading to the view. The writing of the poem, as well as being a factual record, could be seen as a clearing of the passage - and each line, if you count them, represents a step of the way.

M. P. I sense domestic tensions in your poetry too, Anne. Your domestic poem such as 'Fairyland', for example, is not strident in the way Anne Stevenson's and Plath's often are, yet it imparts discomfort and a strange sense of fear. What emotions does the concept of

home evoke in you? Do you feel that the idea of home is inseparable from domesticity? And as a woman, do you think it possible to write without taking onboard the legacy of female inadequacy that Plath speaks so vividly about in her letters and journals?

A. R. "Fairyland" is about a betrayal of innocence. Three little girls enter a brightly-lit caravan in a parking lot expecting a fairy palace in miniature. Instead they find two extremely short individuals in a scaled-down parody of a suburban home. Maybe my concerns about American society started there!

My feelings about domesticity are positive now. As a teenager I was afraid of being sucked into traditional femininity. I deliberately didn't learn to type, although it would have been useful, because I didn't want to take on secretarial summer jobs. Instead I painted houses and installed telephone equipment. I like most domestic tasks, in moderation. No one's forcing me to do them - that's the thing.

The legacy you speak of is undeniable. One has to acknowledge that pain and that repression as it affects other women, world-wide, and affected oneself in the past. I see traces of it in the respective positions of male and female poets in the British poetry world, even now. In the art world, Rachel Whiteread is as well-regarded as Damien Hirst. Poets are only beginning to catch up...This is obviously not as important a matter as low pay and overt misogyny in the workplace, however!

It's possible to reinforce one's own confidence and determination through reading, thinking and periods of achievement - that imaginative space again.. A woman in the West is able to write from a position of strength and comparative ease now. She can aspire to universality without having to be a recluse or a kind of man, and she benefits from an extraordinary legacy - still being unearthed - of literature written by women.

M. P. Finally, Anne, are you able to tell me a little about any current work in progress or of any other literary plans you have for the future?

A. R. I'm assembling a New and Selected. Some of the new poems touch on Belfast, others on America. I'm also writing for theatre.